

NEW WORLDS

PROFILES

Damon Knight

Pennsylvania,
U.S.A.



The deekay is a rare and almost extinct animal and no known photographs of it exist. We have, however, managed to obtain an artist's impression of it together with its shy keeper, author Damon Knight. Both are reputed to haunt the highways, byways and taverns of Pike County in Pennsylvania.

Knight emerged from the wilds of Oregon about 1940 and has since been instrumental in bringing to the science fiction public such now-famous institutions as the NFFF, *Famous Fantastic Mysteries*, Sam Moskowitz and the Milford Science Fiction Writers' Conference. His volume of critical essays, *In Search of Wonder* (Advent, 1957) sold out and is now a collectors' item (the author himself being anxious to obtain a copy). He now lives with his wife and two small children in a run-down Victorian mansion, where he spends the greater part of his time in amateur carpentry.

When pressed to explain the secret of his unique prose style, Knight confides: "I write everything in Lithuanian and then translate backwards." Famous for assaulting policemen when drunk, Knight once concealed his identity by growing a nine-foot-long greyish beard, but says, "I would never do it again." He lived in New York City for ten years, but now approaches the place only rarely and with the greatest caution. Knight is the ex-editor of such short-lived publications as *snide*, *Worlds Beyond*, and more recently, three consecutive issues of *If*. His second novel, *The People Maker*, has just been published by Zenith Books, and he is hard at work on his third.

NEW WORLDS SCIENCE FICTION

No. 84

VOLUME 28

2/-

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SANDS OUR ABODE

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STRANGE MENHIR

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**THE
GENTLE APPROACH**

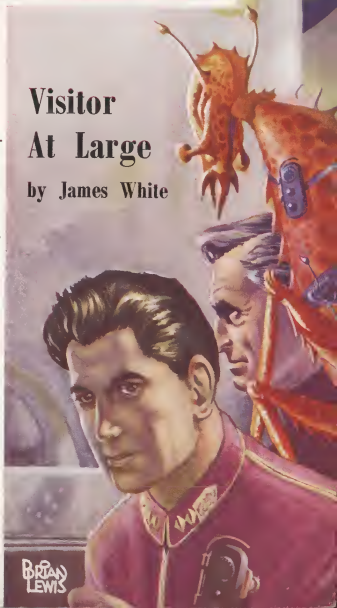
Kenneth Bulmer

Features

13th Year
of Publication

Visitor At Large

by James White



BRIAN
LEWIS

NEW WORLDS SCIENCE FICTION

VOLUME 28

No. 84

MONTHLY

JUNE 1959

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Editor : JOHN CARNELL

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Science . . .

The publication of our *Survey* statistics last month is having a lot of interesting repercussions, especially in the daily and trade press (this being written a few days after that issue was on sale). There is no doubt whatsoever that your co-operation in this matter has contributed largely to the success of the venture and it is our intention to make the *Survey* a regular institution, running it approximately every three years. Incidentally, I have not forgotten that we have yet to publish the statistics concerning our feminine readership—a point raised by a number of newspaper people who were following up the *Survey* report for its news value.

One particularly interesting item (from an editorial point of view) which came out of the *Survey* was the continued preference for novelettes as opposed to serials and short stories. Actually, 51 percent of the returns placed the long stories first against 32 percent whose first choice was for serials. This factor at first tempted us to think along the lines of dropping serials entirely, or reducing them to one or two a year, until we realised that almost one third of those who made Returns favoured serials—and looking back over our record for the past six years (since we commenced serials) we finally came to the conclusion that *New Worlds* is still a well-balanced magazine catering, on an average, for the tastes of the majority.

After all, we cannot please all the people all the time, and the best we can hope for is to please the majority as many months a year as possible.

Another point in the *Survey* which gave us material for thought was in the replies given for "How many other magazines do you read?" We did not specifically ask for titles but many of you listed them. Our surprise here was that many regular readers of *New Worlds* do not necessarily read our second companion magazine *Science Fantasy*, although the latter has nearly as high a circulation, and probably has a higher literary standard if we are to take notice of the various honours many stories from the magazine have been accredited during recent years. For four years in succession *Science Fantasy* has had a story published in Dell's *S-F: Year's Greatest* in U.S.A., while *New Worlds* has only obtained honourable mentions; many stories have been

. . . Fantasy

accepted for foreign publication ; and Brian Aldiss's novelette "Non-Stop" was later turned into a novel and is apparently obtaining world-wide publication at this moment.

There must be something psychological in the word 'fantasy' which puts many readers off. Indeed, for a long time we considered changing the title as, to new readers, the word "fantasy" would probably be interpreted as 'fairy tales.' And new readers today would never have heard of the type of fantasy story produced during the heyday of John Campbell's *Unknown Worlds*. An interesting additional factor to this aversion to the word "fantasy" is shown in presentday American publishing circles where fantasy magazines are now obsolete and those still retaining the word in the title have changed their contents almost entirely to science fiction.

Science Fantasy now being so well established, we felt that a title change would not be advantageous. So—it would seem that a lot of you readers who prefer long stories are missing just the very science fiction material you state you prefer. Ever since John Brunner's outstanding short novel "Earth Is But A Star" in June last year the tendency for most of the long stories has been more towards science fiction—after all, we can publish stories up to 30,000 words in length in that magazine ; stories which are normally far too long for this one.

Take the current issue (No. 35) now on sale, for instance ; it contains a 24,000 word novelette by J. T. McIntosh, who returns to science fiction after a lengthy absence with "200 Years To Christmas," a 'long-voyage' story dealing with the generations who have been born in the closed-cycle environment of a spaceship en route to the stars ; there is also a short novelette by Arthur C. Clarke entitled "The Songs Of Distant Earth," which concerns an isolated colony world receiving its first visit from an Earth ship after more than one hundred years—the repercussions are enormous, and Clarke makes use of them in a style reminiscent of his *Against The Fall Of Night*.

If you have been missing out on *Science Fantasy* I would suggest that you read a copy or two in the near future—you will be in for some pleasant reading surprises.

John Carnell

James White's "Sector General" series is probably one of the best this or any other magazine has ever published. The plot possibilities are endless, the number of characters infinite, and the complications over-abundant. An ordinary hospital teems with drama—put one in space and add alien entities and environments and we have something to brag about.

VISITOR AT LARGE

By James White

I

Despite the vast resources of medical and surgical skill available, resources which were acknowledged second to none anywhere in the civilised Galaxy, there had to be times when a case arrived in Sector General for which nothing whatever could be done. This particular patient was of classification SRTT, which was a physiological type never before encountered in the hospital. It was amoebic, possessed the ability to extrude any limbs, sensory organs or protective tegument necessary to the environment in which it found itself, and was so fantastically adaptable that it was difficult to imagine how one of these beings could ever fall sick in the first place.

The lack of symptoms was the most baffling aspect of the case. There was in evidence none of the visually alarming growths of malfunctionings to which so many of the extra-terrestrial species were prone, nor were there any bacteria present in what could be considered harmful quantities. Instead the patient was simply *melting*—quietly, cleanly and without fuss or bother, like a piece of ice left in a warm room,

its body was literally turning to water. Nothing that was tried had any effect in halting the process and, while they continued their attempts at finding a cure with even greater intensity, the Diagnosticians and lesser doctors in attendance had begun to realise a little sadly that the run of medical miracles produced with such monotonous regularity by Sector Twelve General Hospital was due to be broken.

And it was for that reason alone that one of the strictest rules of the hospital was temporarily relaxed.

"I suppose the best place to start is at the beginning," said Dr. Conway, trying hard not to stare at the iridescent and not quite atrophied wings of his new assistant. "At Reception where the problems of admittance are dealt with."

Conway waited to see if the other had any comments, and continuing to walk in the direction of the stated objective while doing so. Rather than walk beside his companion he maintained a two-yard lead—not out of any wish to give offence but for the simple reason that he was afraid of inflicting severe physical damage on his assistant if he strayed any closer than that.

The new assistant was a GLNO—six-legged, exoskeletal and insect-like, with the empathic faculty—from the planet Cnussa. The gravity-pull of its home world was less than one-twelfth Earth-normal, which was the reason for an insect species growing to such size and becoming dominant, so that it wore two anti-G belts to neutralise the attraction which would otherwise have mashed it into ruin against the corridor floor. One neutraliser belt would have been adequate for this purpose, but Conway did not blame the being one bit for wanting to play safe. It was a spindly, awkward-looking and incredibly fragile life-form, and its name was Dr. Prilicia.

Prilicia had previous experience both in planetary and in the smaller multi-environment hospitals and so was not completely green, Conway had been told, but it would naturally feel at a loss before the size and complexity of Sector General. Conway was to be its guide and mentor for a while and then, when his present period of duty in charge of the nursery was complete, he would hand over to Prilicia. Apparently the hospital's Director had decided that light-gravity life-forms with their extreme sensitivity and delicacy of touch would be particularly suited to the care and handling of the more fragile e-t embryos.

It was a good idea, Conway thought as he hastily interposed himself between Prilicla and a Tralthan intern who lumbered past on six elephantine feet, if the low-gravity life-form in question could survive the association with its more massive and clumsy colleagues.

"You understand, of course," said Conway, "that the system of corridors we are now traversing—which contains an atmosphere suited to both ours and several other species—is paralleled below, above and on all sides by others whose pressure, temperature and composition are vastly different. Those used by the chlorine-breathing Illensans, the water-breathers from Chalderescol II, and the types of ultra-frigid life which exists in methane as well as those who do not breathe at all. Admittedly it is a horribly complicated arrangement, but it has been found to be the only one which allows any doctor in the hospital to reach the vicinity of any patient in the hospital quickly and without having to undergo repeated changes of protective covering. This way anyone can go anywhere and change only at the last moment."

"A comfortable as well as a more efficient arrangement for all concerned, I should think," said Prilicla.

"Yes," said Conway as he guided the other into the short corridor leading to Reception's control-room. "But getting the patients into the place is a problem in itself. It isn't so bad with the smaller ones—I remember having twenty-odd Telfi VTXMs come in in a box that I could have carried under my arm, if I'd been stupid enough to ignore the radioactivity—but with Tralthan patients, or a forty-foot long AUGL from Chalderescol . . ." Conway broke off suddenly and said, "Here we are."

Through a wide transparent wall-section could be seen a shadowed room containing three massive control desks, only one of which was currently occupied. The being before it was a DBDG—the same general physiological classification as Conway, and differed from the Earth-human species only by reason of its smaller stature, its seven-fingered hands and its overall coat of tight, curly red fur. A group of indicator lights on the desk before it showed that the being had just made contact with a ship approaching the hospital.

Conway said, "Listen . . ."

"Identify yourself, please," said the red teddybear in its staccato, barking speech, which was filtered through Conway's

translator as flat and toneless English and which came to Prilicla as equally unemotionless Cinrusskin. "Patient, visitor or Staff, and species?"

"Visitor," came the reply, "and Human."

There was a second's pause, then: "Give your physiological classification please," said the red-furred receptionist with a wink towards the two watchers. "All intelligent races refer to their own species as human and think of all others as being non-human, so that what you call yourself has no meaning . . ."

Conway only half heard the conversation after that because he was so engrossed in trying to visualise what a being with that classification could look like. The double-T meant that both its shape and physical characteristics were variable, R that it had high heat and pressure tolerance, and the S in that combination . . . ! If there had not actually been one waiting outside, Conway would not have believed such a weird beastie could exist.

And the visitor was an important person, apparently, because the receptionist was now busily engaged in passing on the news of its arrival to various beings within the hospital—most of whom were Diagnosticians, no less. All at once Conway was intensely curious to see this highly unusual being, but thought that he would not be showing a very good example to Prilicla if he dashed off on a rubbernecking expedition when they had work to do elsewhere. Also, his assistant was still very much an unknown quantity where Conway was concerned—Prilicla might be one of those touchy individuals who held that to look at a member of another species for no other reason than to satisfy mere curiosity was a grievous insult . . .

"If it would not interfere with more urgent duties," broke in the flat, translated voice of Prilicla, "I would very much like to see this visitor."

Bless you! thought Conway, but outwardly pretended to mull over the latter. Finally he said, "Normally I could not allow that, but as the lock where the SRTT is entering is not far from here and there is some time to spare before we are due at our wards, I expect it will be all right to indulge your curiosity just this once. Please follow me, Doctor."

As he waved goodbye to the furry receptionist Conway thought that it was a very good thing that Prilicla's Translator was incapable of transferring the strongly ironic content of

those last words, so that the other was not aware what a rise Conway was taking out of him. And then suddenly he stopped in his mental tracks. Prilicla, he realised uncomfortably, was an empath. The being had not said very much since they had met a short time ago, but everything that it had said had backed up Conway's feelings in the particular matter under discussion. His new assistant was not a telepath—it could not read thoughts—but it was sensitive to feelings and emotions and would therefore have been aware of Conway's curiosity.

Conway felt like kicking himself for forgetting that empathic faculty, and wryly wondered just who had been taking the rise out of which.

He had to console himself with the thought that at least he was working with a being who could not help but be agreeable, and not like some of the people he had been attached to recently. Conway was remembering the hectic time he had had with a certain Dr. Arretapec and its dinosaur . . .*

Lock Six, where the SRTT was to be admitted, could have been reached in a few minutes if Conway had used the short cut through the water-filled corridor leading to the AUGL operating room and across the surgical ward of the chlorine-breathing PVSJs. But it would have meant donning one of the lightweight diving suits for protection, and while he could climb in and out of such a suit in no time at all, he very much doubted if the ultra-leggy Prilicla could do so. They therefore had to take the long way round, and hurry.

At one point a Tralthan wearing the gold-edged armband of a Diagnostician and an Earth-human maintenance engineer overtook them, the FGLI charging along like a runaway tank and the Earthman having to trot to keep up. Conway and Prilicla stood aside respectfully to allow the Diagnostician to pass—as well as to avoid being flattened—and then continued. A scrap of overheard conversation identified the two beings as part of the arriving SRTT's reception committee, and from the somewhat caustic tone of the Earth-human's remarks it was obvious that the visitor had arrived earlier than expected.

When they turned a corner a few seconds later and came within sight of the great entry lock Conway saw a sight which made him smile in spite of himself. Three corridors converged on the antechamber of Lock Six on this level as well as two others on upper and lower levels which reached it via sloping

ramps, and figures were hurrying along each one. As well as the Tralthan and Earthman who had just passed them there was another Tralthan, two of the DBLF caterpillars and a spiny, membranous Illensan in a transparent protective suit—who had just emerged from the adjacent chlorine-filled corridor of the PVSJ section—all heading for the inner seal of the big Lock, which was already swinging open on the expected visitor. To Conway it seemed to be a wildly ludicrous situation, and he had a sudden mental picture of the whole crazy menagerie of them coming together with a crash in the same spot at the same time . . .

Then while he was still smiling at the thought, comedy changed swiftly and without warning to tragedy.

As the visitor entered the antechamber and the seal closed behind it Conway saw something that was a little like a crocodile with horn-tipped tentacles and a lot like nothing he had ever seen before. He saw the being shrink away from the figures hurrying to meet it, then suddenly dart towards the PVSJ—who was, Conway was to remember later, both the nearest and the smallest. Everybody seemed to be shouting at once then, so much so that Conway's and presumably everyone else's Translators went into an ear-piercing squeal of oscillation through sheer overload.

Faced by the teeth and hard-tipped tentacles of the charging visitor the Illensan PVSJ, no doubt thinking of the flimsiness of the envelope which held its life-saving chlorine around it, fled back into the inter-corridor lock for the safety of its own section. The visitor, its way suddenly blocked by a Tralthan booming unheard reassurances at it, turned suddenly and scuttled for the same airlock . . .

All such locks were fitted with rapid action controls in case of emergency, controls which caused one door to open and the other to shut simultaneously instead of waiting for the chamber to be evacuated and refilled with the required atmosphere. The PVSJ, with the berserk visitor close behind it and a rent already torn in its suit by the SRTT's teeth so that it was in imminent danger of dying from oxygen poisoning, rightly considered his case to be an emergency one and activated the rapid-action controls. What it was perhaps too frightened to notice was that the visitor was not completely into the lock, and that when the inner door opened the outer one would neatly cut the visitor in two . . .

There was so much shouting and confusion around the lock that Conway did not see who the quick-thinking person was who saved the visitor's life by pressing yet another emergency button, the one which caused both doors to open together. This action kept the SRTT from being cut in two, but there was now a direct opening into the PVSJ section from which billowed thick, yellow clouds of chlorine gas. Before Conway could react, contamination detectors in the corridor walls touched off the alarm siren and simultaneously closed the air-tight doors in the immediate vicinity, and they were all neatly trapped.

For a wild moment Conway fought the urge to run to the airtight doors and beat on them with his fists. Then he thought of plunging through that poisonous fog to another intersection lock which was on the other side of it. But he could see a Maintenceman and one of the DBLF caterpillars in it already, both so overcome with chlorine that Conway doubted if they could live long enough to put on the suits. Could he, he wondered sickly, get over there? The lock chamber also contained helmets good for ten minutes or so—that was demanded by the safety regulations—but to do it he would have to hold his breath for at least three minutes and keep his eyes jammed shut, because if he got a single whiff of that gas or it got at his eyes he would be helplessly disabled. But how could he pass that heaving, struggling mass of Tralthan legs and tentacles spread across the corridor floor while groping about with his eyes shut . . . ?

The fear-filled chaos of his thoughts was interrupted by Prilicla, who said, "Chlorine is lethal to my species. Please excuse me."

Prilicla was doing something peculiar to itself. The long, many-jointed legs were waving and jerking about as though performing some weird, ritual dance and two of the four manipulatory appendages—whose possession was the reason for its species' fame as surgeons—were doing complicated things with what looked like rolls of transparent plastic sheeting. Conway did not see exactly how it happened but suddenly his GLNO assistant was swathed in a loose, transparent cover through which protruded its six legs and two manipulators—its body, wings and other two members, which were busily engaged in spraying sealing solution on the leg

openings, were completely covered by it. The loose covering bellied out and became taut, proving that it was airtight.

"I didn't know you had . . ." Conway began, then with a surge of hope bursting up within him he gabbled, "Listen. Do exactly as I tell you. You've got to get me a helmet, *quickly* . . ."

But the hope died just as suddenly before he finished giving the GLNO his instructions. Prilicla could doubtless find a helmet for him, but how could the being ever hope to make it to the lock where they were kept through that struggling mass on the floor between. One blow could tear off a leg or cave in that flimsy exo-skeleton like an egg-shell. He couldn't ask the GLNO to do it, it would be murder.

He was about to cancel all previous instructions and tell the GLNO to stay put and save itself when Prilicla dashed across the corridor floor, ran diagonally up the wall and disappeared into the chlorine fog travelling along the ceiling. Conway reminded himself that many insect lifeforms possessed sucker-tipped feet and began to feel hopeful again, so much so that other sensations began to register.

Close beside him the wall annunciator was informing everyone in the hospital that there was contamination in the region of Lock Six, while below it the intercom unit was emitting red light and harsh buzzing sounds as somebody in Maintenance Division tried to find out whether or not the contaminated area was occupied. The drifting gas was almost on him as Conway snatched at the intercom mike.

"Quiet and listen !" he shouted. "Conway here, at Lock Six. Two FGLIs, two DBLFs, one DBDG all with chlorine poisoning not yet fatal. One PVSJ in damaged protective suit with oxy-poisoning and possibly other injuries, and one SRTT condition unknown. For God's sake get a move on up there—"

A sudden stinging sensation in the eyes made Conway drop the mike hurriedly. He backed away until stopped by the airtight door and watched the yellow mist creep nearer. He could see practically nothing of what was going on down the corridor now, and an agonised eternity seemed to go by before the spindly shape of Prilicla came swinging along the ceiling above him.

II

The helmet which Prilicla brought was in reality a mask, a mask with a self-contained air supply which when in position adhered firmly along the edge of the hair line, cheeks and lower jaw. Its air was good only for a very limited time—ten minutes or so—but with it on and the danger of death temporarily removed, Conway discovered that he could think much more clearly.

His first action was to go through the still open intersection lock. The PVSJ inside it was motionless and with the grey blush which was the beginning of a type of skin cancer spreading over its body—to the PVSJ life-form oxygen was vicious stuff. As gently as possible he dragged the Illensan into its own section and to a nearby storage compartment which he remembered being there. Pressure in this section was slightly greater than that maintained for warm-blooded oxygen-breathers so that where the PVSJ was concerned the air here was reasonably pure. Conway shut it in the compartment, after first grabbing an armful of the woven plastic sheets which in this section were the equivalent of bed linen. There was no sign of the SRTT.

Back in the other corridor he explained to Prilicla what he wanted done—the Earth-human he had seen earlier had succeeded in donning his suit, but was blundering about with eyes streaming and coughing violently and was obviously incapable of giving any assistance. Conway picked his way around the weakly moving or unconscious bodies to the seal of Lock Six and opened it. There was a neatly racked row of air bottles on the wall inside. He lifted down two of them and staggered out.

Prilicla had one unconscious form already covered with a sheet. Conway cracked the valve of an air-bottle and slid it under the covering, then watched as the plastic sheet bellied and rippled slightly with the air being released underneath it. It was the crudest possible form of oxygen tent, Conway thought, but the best that could be done at the moment. He left for more bottles.

After the third trip Conway began to notice the warning signs. He was sweating profusely, his head was splitting and big black splotches were beginning to blot out his vision—his air supply was running out. It was high time he took off the emergency helmet, stuck his own head under a sheet like

the others and waited for the rescuers to arrive. He took a few steps towards the nearest sheeted figure, and the floor hit him. His heart was banging thunderously in his chest, his lungs were on fire and all at once he didn't even have the strength to pull off the helmet . . .

Conway was forced from his state of deep and oddly comfortable unconsciousness by pain: something was making strong and repeated attempts to cave in his chest. He stuck it just as long as he could, then opened his eyes and said, "Get off me, dammit, I'm all right!"

The hefty interne who had been enthusiastically engaged in giving Conway artificial respiration climbed to his feet. He said, "When we arrived, daddy-longlegs here said you had ceased to emote. I was worried about you for a moment—well, slightly worried." He grinned and added, "If you can walk and talk, O'Mara wants to see you."

Conway grunted and rose to his feet. Blowers and filtering apparatus had been set up in the corridor and were rapidly clearing the air of the last vestiges of chlorine and the casualties were being removed, some on tented stretcher-carriers and others being assisted by their rescuers. He fingered the raw area of forehead caused by the hurried removal of his helmet and took a few great gulps of air just to reassure himself that the nightmare of a few minutes ago was really over.

"Thank you, Doctor," he said feelingly.

"Don't mention it, Doctor," said the intern.

"Come on," he said, turning to Prilicla. "You haven't met Major O'Mara yet, and there are a few things you ought to know about him before you do . . ."

O'Mara was the hospital's Chief Psychologist, Conway explained, and as such was responsible for the mental health and well-being of all the wildly varied individuals and species on the Staff, his main purpose being the avoidance of friction between the different life-forms by ensuring that no situation arose or that no being was allowed to remain there who was likely to bring about such friction. It was a big job and if O'Mara was a bit sharp at times and at others showed a tendency to pry into what did not seem to be any of his business, and generally acted the part of a chief of secret police, such behaviour should be forgiven him.

O'Mara was *not* responsible for the psychological shortcomings of patients in the hospital, but because it was so often

impossible to tell when a purely physical pain left off and a psychosomatic began he was consulted in these cases as well.

Finally, he bore the rank of Major in the Monitor Corps, the force whose members acted as police, governmental messenger boys and in several other less publicised capacities for the Galactic Federation, but within the hospital it was difficult to draw a limiting line to his authority—not, Conway hastened to add, that he was the type to abuse it.

They found O'Mara in the Educator Room. The Chief Psychologist wasted no time on preliminaries, he pointed to a chair for Conway and indicated a sort of surrealistic wastepaper basket to Prilicla and barked, "What happened?"

The room was in shadow except for the glow of indicator lights on the Educator equipment and a single lamp on O'Mara's desk. All Conway could see of the psychologist as he began his story was two hard, competent hands projecting from the sleeves of a dark green uniform and a pair of steady grey eyes in a shadowed face. The hands did not move and the eyes never left him while Conway was speaking.

When he was finished O'Mara sighed and was silent for several seconds, then he said, "There were four of our top Diagnosticians at Lock Six just then, beings this hospital could ill afford to lose. The prompt action you took certainly saved at least three of their lives, so you're a couple of heroes. But I'll spare your blushes and not belabour that point.

"Neither," he added drily, "will I embarrass you by asking what you were doing there in the first place."

Conway coughed. He said, "What I'd like to know is why the SRTT ran amok like that. Because of the crowd running to meet it, I'd say, except that no intelligent, civilised being would behave like that. The only visitors we allow here are either government people or visiting specialists, neither of which are the type to be scared at the sight of an alien life-form. And why so many Diagnosticians to meet it in the first place?"

"They were there," replied O'Mara, "because they were anxious to see what an SRTT looked like when it was not trying to look like something else. This data might have aided them in a case they are working on. Also, with a hitherto unknown life-form like that it is impossible to guess at what made it act as it did. And finally, it is not the type of visitor

which we allow here, but we had to break the rules this time because its parent is in the hospital, a terminal case."

Conway said softly, "I see."

A Monitor Lieutenant came into the room at that point and hurried across to O'Mara. "Excuse me, sir," he said. "I've been able to find one item which may help us with the search for the visitor. A DBLF nurse reports seeing a PVSJ moving away from the area of the accident at about the right time. To one of the DBLF caterpillars the PVSJs are anything but pretty, as you know, but the nurse says that this one looked worse than usual, a real freak. So much so that the DBLF was sure that it was a patient suffering from something pretty terrible—"

"You checked that we have no PVSJ suffering from the malady described?"

"Yes, sir. There is no such case."

O'Mara looked suddenly grim. He said, "Very good, Carson, you know what to do next," and nodded dismissal.

Conway had been finding it hard to contain himself during the conversation, and with the departure of the Lieutenant he burst out, "The thing I saw come out of the airlock had tentacles and . . . and . . . Well, it wasn't anything like a PVSJ. I know that an SRTT is able to modify its physical structure, of course, but so radically and in such a short time . . . !"

Abruptly O'Mara stood up. He said, "We know practically nothing about this life-form — its needs, capabilities or emotional response patterns—and it is high time we found out. I'm going to build a fire under Colinson in Communications to see what he can dig up ; environment, evolutionary background, cultural and social influences and so on. We can't have a visitor running around loose like this, it's bound to make a nuisance of itself through sheer ignorance.

"But what I want you two to do is this," he went on. "Keep an eye open for any odd-looking patients or embryos in the Nursery sections. Lieutenant Carson has just left to get on the PA and make these instructions general. If you do find somebody who may be our SRTT approach them *gently*. Be reassuring, make no sudden moves and be sure, to avoid confusing it, that only one of you talks at once. And contact me immediately."

When they were outside again Conway decided that nothing further could be done in the current work period, and postponing the rounds of their wards for another hour, led the way to the vast room which served as a dining hall for all the warm-blooded oxygen-breathers on the hospital's Staff. The place was, as usual, crowded, and although it was divided up into sections for the widely variant life-forms present, Conway could see many tables where three or four different classifications had come together—with extreme discomfort for some—to talk shop.

Conway pointed out a vacant table to Prilicla and began working towards it, only to have his assistant—aided by its still functional wings—get there before him and in time to foil two Maintencemen making for the same spot. A few heads turned during this fifty yard flight, but only briefly—the diners were used to much stranger sights than that.

“I expect most of our food is suited to your metabolism,” said Conway when he was seated, “but do you have any special preferences?”

Prilicla had, and Conway nearly choked when he heard them. But it was not the combination of well-cooked spaghetti and raw carrots that was so bad, it was the way the GLNO set about eating the spaghetti when it arrived. With all four eating appendages working furiously Prilicla wove it into a sort of rope which was passed into the being's beak-like mouth. Conway was not usually affected by this sort of thing, but the sight was definitely doing things to his stomach.

Suddenly Prilicla stopped. “My method of ingestion is disturbing you,” it said. “I will go to another table—”

“No, no,” said Conway quickly, realising that his feelings had been picked up by the empath. “That won't be necessary, I assure you. But it is a point of etiquette here that, whenever it is possible, a being dining in mixed company uses the same eating tools as its host or senior at the table. Er, do you think you could manage a fork?”

Prilicla could manage a fork. Conway had never seen spaghetti disappear so fast.

From the subject of food the talk drifted not too unnaturally to the hospital's Diagnosticians and the Educator Tape system without which these august beings—and indeed the whole hospital—could not function.

Sector General hospital was equipped to treat every known form of intelligent life, but no single being—Earth-human or otherwise—could hold in its brain even a fraction of the physiological data necessary for this purpose. Surgical dexterity was a matter of time and training, of course, but complete physiological knowledge on any patient was furnished by means of an Educator Tape, which was simply the brain record of some great medical genius belonging to the same or a similar species as the case being treated. Normally this knowledge was impressed on the brain of the doctor in charge of the case only until the operation or course of treatment was completed, then it was erased. The sole exceptions to this rule were the Diagnosticians.

They were the beings whose great minds were considered stable enough to contain, permanently, six, seven or even ten Educator Tapes. To these Diagnosticians therefore fell the job of original research in xenological medicine—using their data-crammed minds as the jumping-off point—and the diagnosis and treatment of new diseases in hitherto unknown life-forms.

Diagnosticians deservedly had the respect and admiration of everyone in the hospital—and a certain amount of the pity as well. For it was not simply knowledge which the Educator gave them, the whole personality of the entity who had possessed that knowledge was impressed on their brains as well. In effect the Diagnostician subjected himself or itself voluntarily to the most drastic type of multiple schizophrenia, and with the alien other components sharing their minds so utterly *different* in every respect that they often did not even share the same system of logic.

Their one and only common denominator was the need of all doctors, regardless of size, shape or number of legs, to cure the sick.

There was a DBDG Earth human Diagnostician at a table nearby who was visibly having to force himself to eat a perfectly ordinary steak. Conway happened to know that this man was engaged on a case which necessitated using a large amount of the knowledge contained in the Tralthan physiology tape which he had been given. The use of this knowledge had brought in prominence within his mind the personality of the Tralthan who had furnished the brain record, and Tralthans abhorred meat in all its forms . . .

III

After lunch Conway took Prilicla to the first of the wards to which they were assigned, and on the way continued to reel off more statistics and background information. The hospital comprised three hundred and eighty-four levels and accurately reproduced the environments of the sixty-eight different forms of intelligent life currently known to the Galactic Federation. There were wards, operating and therapy rooms and diet kitchens for high-temperature life-forms, the low-gravity types, the water-breathers ; also the beings who existed through the direct conversion of radiation—very hard radiation—and the others who would shrivel up and die if the temperature rose much above minus one hundred and thirty. Conway was not trying to cow Prilicla with the vastness of the great hospital floating out on the Galactic rim, nor to boast, although he was intensely proud of the fact, that he had gained a post in this very famous establishment. It was simply that he was uneasy about his assistant's means of protecting itself against the conditions it would shortly meet, and this was his way of working around to the subject.

But he need not have worried, for Prilicla demonstrated how the light, almost diaphanous, suit which had saved it at Lock Six could be strengthened from inside by a scaled-down adaptation of the type of force-field used as meteorite protection on interstellar ships. When necessary its legs could be folded so as to be within the protective covering as well, instead of projecting outside it as they had done at the lock.

While they were changing prior to entering the AUGL Nursery Ward, which was their first call, Conway began filling in his assistant on the case history of the occupants.

The fully-grown physiological type AUGL was a forty foot long, oviparous, armoured fish-like life-form native of Chalderescol II, but the beings now in the ward for observation had been hatched only six weeks ago and measured only three feet. Two previous hatchings by the same mother had, as had this one, been in all respects normal and with the off-spring seemingly in perfect health, yet two months later they had all died. A PM performed on their home world gave the cause of death as extreme calcification of the articular cartilage in practically every joint in the body, but had been unable to shed any light on the cause of the death. Now Sector General was keeping a watchful eye on the latest hatching, and

Conway was hoping that it would be a case of third time lucky.

"At present I look them over every day," Conway went on, "and on every third day take an AUGL tape and give them a thorough checkup. Now that you are assisting me this will also apply to you. But when you take this tape I'd advise you to have it erased immediately after the examination, unless you would *like* to wander around for the rest of the day with half of your brain convinced that you are a fish and wanting to act accordingly . . ."

"That would be an intriguing but no doubt confusing hybrid," agreed Prilicla. The GLNO was now enclosed completely—with the exception of two manipulators—in the bubble of its protective suit, which it had weighted sufficiently for it not to be hampered by too much bouyancy. Seeing that Conway was also ready it operated the lock controls, and as they entered the great tank of warm, greenish water that was the AUGL ward it added, "Are the patients responding to treatment?"

Conway shook his head, then realising that the gesture probably meant nothing to the GLNO he said, "We are still at the exploratory stage—treatment has not yet begun. But I've had a few ideas, which I can't properly discuss with you until we both take that AUGL tape tomorrow, and am fairly certain that two of our three patients will come through—in effect, one of them will have to be used as a guinea-pig in order to save the others.

"The symptoms appear and develop very quickly," he continued, "which is why I want such a close watch kept on them. Now that the danger point is so close I think I'll make it three-hourly, and we'll work out a timetable so's neither of us will miss too much sleep. You see, the quicker we spot the first symptoms the more time we have to act and the greater the possibility of saving all three of them. I'm very keen to do the hat-trick."

Prilicla wouldn't know what a hat-trick was either, Conway thought, but the being would quickly learn how to interpret his nods, gestures and figures of speech—Conway had had to do the same in his early days with e-t superiors, sometimes wondering fulminatingly why somebody did not make a tape on Alien Esoterics to aid junior interns in his position. But these were only surface thoughts. At the back of his mind, so steady and so sharp that it might have been painted there, was the picture of a young, almost embryonic life-form whose

developing exo-skeleton—the hundred or so flat, bony plates normally free to slide or move on flexible hinges of cartilage so as to allow mobility and breathing—was about to become a petrified fossil imprisoning, for a very short time, the frantic consciousness within . . .

“How can I assist you at the moment?” asked Prilicla, bringing Conway’s mind back from near future to present time with a rush. The GLNO was eyeing the three thin, streamlined shapes darting about the great tank and obviously wondering how it was going to stop one long enough to examine it. It added, “They’re fast, aren’t they?”

“Yes, and very fragile,” said Conway. “Also they are so young that for present purposes they can be considered mindless. They frighten easily and any attempt to approach them closely sends them into such a panic that they swim madly about until exhausted or injure themselves against the tank walls. What we have to do is lay a minefield . . .”

Quickly Conway explained and demonstrated how to place a pattern of anaesthetic bulbs which dissolved in the water and how, gently and at a distance, to manoeuvre their elusive patients through it. Later, while they were examining the three small, unconscious forms and Conway saw how sensitive and precise was the touch of Prilicla’s manipulators and the corresponding sharpness of the GLNO’s mind, his hopes for all three of the infant AUGLs increased.

They left the warm and to Conway rather pleasant environment of the AUGLs for the ‘hot’ ward of their section. This time the checking of the occupants was done with the aid of remote-controlled mechanisms from behind twenty feet of shielding. There was nothing of an urgent nature in this ward, and before leaving Conway pointed out the complicated masses of plumbing surrounding it. The Maintenance Division he explained, used the ‘hot’ ward as a standby power pile to light and heat the hospital.

Constantly in the background the wall annunciators kept droning out the progress of the search for the SRTT visitor. It had not been found yet, and cases of mistaken identity and of beings seeing things were mounting steadily. Conway had not thought much about the SRTT since leaving O’Mara, but now he was beginning to feel a little anxious at the thought of what the runaway visitor might do in this section especially—not to mention what some of the infant patients might do to it. If only he knew more about it, had some idea of its limitations. He decided to call O’Mara.

In reply to Conway's request the Chief Psychologist said, "Our latest information is that the SRTT life-form evolved on a planet with an eccentric orbit around its primary. Geologic, climatic and temperature changes were such that a high degree of adaptability was necessary for survival. Before they attained a civilisation their means of defence was either to assume as frightening an aspect as possible or to copy the physical form of their attackers in the hope that they would escape detection in this way—protective mimicry being the favourite method of avoiding danger, and so often used that the process has become almost involuntary. There are some other items regarding mass and dimensions at different ages they are a very long-lived species—and this not particularly helpful collection of data, which was digested from the report of the survey ship which discovered the planet, ends by saying that all the foregoing is for our information only and that these beings do not take sick."

O'Mara paused briefly, then added, "Hah !"

"I agree," said Conway.

"One item we have which might explain its panicking on arrival," O'Mara went on, "is that it is customary among them for the very youngest to be present at the death of a parent rather than the eldest—there is an unusually strong emotional bond between parent and last-born. Estimates of mass place our runaway as being very young. Not a baby, of course, but definitely nowhere near maturity."

Conway was still digesting this when the Major continued, "As to its limitations, I'd say that the Methane section is too cold for it and the radioactive wards too hot—also that glorified turkish bath on level 18 where they breathe super-heated steam. Apart from those, your guess is as good as mine where it may turn up."

"It might help a little if I could see this SRTT's parent," Conway said. "Is that possible?"

There was a lengthy pause, then: "Just barely," said O'Mara drily. "The immediate vicinity of that patient is literally crawling with Diagnosticians and other high-powered talent . . . But come up after you've finished your rounds and I'll try to fix it."

"Thank you, sir," said Conway and broke the circuit.

He still felt a vague uneasiness about the SRTT visitor, a dark premonition that he had not yet finished with this e-t juvenile delinquent who was the ultimate in quick-change

artists. Maybe, he thought sourly, his current duties had brought out the mother in him, but at the thought of the havoc which that SRTT could cause—the damage to equipment and fittings, the interruption of important and closely-timed courses of treatment and the physical injury, perhaps even death, to the more fragile life-forms through its ignorant blundering about—Conway felt himself go a little sick.

For the failure to capture the runaway had made plain one very disquieting fact, and that was that the SRTT was not too young and immature not to know how to work the intersection locks . . .

Half angrily, Conway pushed these useless anxieties to the back of his mind and began explaining to Prilicla about the patients in the ward they were going to visit next, and the protective measures and examinative procedures necessary when handling them.

This ward contained twenty-eight infants of the FROB classification—low, squat, immensely strong beings with a horny covering that was like flexible armour plate. Adults of the species with their increased mass tended to be slow and ponderous, but the infants could move surprisingly fast despite the condition of four times Earth-normal gravity and pressure in which they lived. Heavy-duty suits were called for in these conditions and the floor level of the ward was never used by visiting physicians or nursing staff except in cases of the gravest emergency. Patients for examination were raised from the floor by a grab and lifting apparatus to the cupola set in the ceiling for this purpose, where they were anaesthetised before the grab was released. This was done with a long, extremely strong needle which was inserted at the point where the inner side of the foreleg joined the trunk—one of the very few soft spots on the FROB's body.

" . . . I expect you to break a lot of needles before you get the hang of it," Conway added, " but don't worry about that, or think that you are hurting them. These little darlings are so tough that if a bomb went off beside them they would hardly blink."

Conway was silent for a few seconds while they walked briskly towards the FROB ward—Prilicla's six, multi-jointed and pencil-thin legs seeming to spread out all over the place, but somehow never actually getting underfoot. He no longer felt that he was walking on eggs when he was near the GLNO,

or that the other would crumple up and blow away if he so much as brushed against it. Prilicla had demonstrated its ability to avoid all contacts likely to be physically harmful to it in a way which, now that Conway was becoming accustomed to it, was both dexterous and strangely graceful.

A man, he thought, could get used to working with anything.

"But to get back to our thick-skinned little friends," Conway resumed, "Physical toughness in that species—especially in the younger age groups—is not accompanied by resistance to germ or virus infections. Later they develop the necessary antibodies and as adults are disgustingly healthy, but in the infant stage . . ."

"They catch everything," Prilicla put in. "And as soon as a new disease is discovered they get that, too."

Conway laughed. "I was forgetting that most e-t hospitals have their quota of FROBs and that you may already have had experience with them. You will know also that these diseases are rarely fatal to the infants, but that their cure is long, complicated, and not very rewarding, because they straightaway catch something else. None of our twenty-eight cases here are serious, and the reason that they are here rather than at a local hospital is that we are trying to produce a sort of shotgun serum which will artificially induce in them the immunity to infection which will eventually be theirs in later life and so . . . Stop!"

The word was sharp, low and urgent, a shouted whisper. Prilicla froze, its sucker-tipped legs gripping the corridor floor, and stared along with Conway at the being who had just appeared at the intersection ahead of them.

At first glance it looked like an Illensan. The shapeless, spiny body with the dry, rustling membrane joining upper and lower appendages belonged unmistakably to the PVSJ chlorine-breathers. But there were two eating tentacles which seemed to have been transplanted from an FGLI, a furry breast pad which was pure DBLF and it was breathing, as they were, an atmosphere rich in oxygen.

It could only be the runaway.

All the laws of physiology to the contrary Conway felt his heart battering at the back of his throat somewhere as, remembering O'Mara's strict orders not to frighten the being, he tried to think of something friendly and reassuring to say. But the SRTT took off immediately it caught sight of them, and all Conway could find to say was, "Quick, after it!"

At a dead run they reached the intersection and turned into the corridor taken by the fleeing SRTT, Prilicla scuttling along the ceiling again to keep out of the way of Conway's pounding feet. But the sight in front of them caused Conway to forget all about being gentle and reassuring, and he yelled, "Stop, you fool! Don't go in there . . .!"

The runaway was at the entrance to the FROB ward.

They reached the entry lock just too late and watched helplessly through the port as the SRTT opened the inner seal and, gripped by the four times normal gravity pull of the ward, was flung down out of sight. The inner door closed automatically then, allowing Prilicla and Conway to enter the lock and prepare for the environment within the ward.

Conway struggled frantically into the heavy duty suit which he kept in the lock chamber and quickly set the repulsion of its anti-gravity belt to compensate for the conditions inside. Prilicla, meanwhile, was doing similar things to its own equipment. While checking the seals and fastenings of the suit, and swearing at this very necessary waste of time, Conway could see through the inner inspection window a sight which made him shudder.

The psuedo-Illensan shape of the SRTT lay plastered against the floor. It was twitching slightly, and already one of the larger FROB infants was coming pounding up to investigate this odd-looking object. One of the great, spatulate feet must have trod on the recumbent SRTT, because it jerked away and began rapidly and incredibly to *change*. The weak, membranous appendages of the PVSJ seemed to dissolve into the main body which became the bony, lizard-like form with the wicked, horn-tipped tentacles which they had seen first at Lock Six. This was obviously the SRTT's most frightening manifestation.

But the infant FROB possessed nearly five times the other's mass and so could hardly be expected to be frightened. It put down its massive head and butted, sending the SRTT crashing against the wall plating twenty feet across the ward. The FROB wanted to play.

Both doctors were out of the lock and onto the ceiling catwalk now, where the view was much clearer. The SRTT was changing again, fast. The tentacled lizard shape had not worked at all well for it in four-G conditions against these infant behemoths and it was trying something else.

The FROB had closed in on it again and was watching fascinated.

IV

Conway said urgently, "Doctor, can you handle the grab apparatus? Good! Then go to it . . ." As Prilicla scurried along the catwalk to the control cupola Conway set his anti-gravity controls to zero and called, "I'll direct you from below." Weightless now, he kicked himself towards the floor.

But Conway was no stranger to the FROB infant—very probably it disliked or was bored by this diminutive figure whose only game was that of sticking big needles in it while something big and strong held it still, and despite all of Conway's frantic shouting and arm-waving he found himself being ignored. But other occupants of the ward were taking an interest, and their attention was being drawn to the still-changing SRTT . . .

"No!" Conway shouted, aghast at what the visitor was changing into. "No! Stop! *Change back . . .!*"

But it was too late. The whole ward seemed to be stampeding towards the SRTT, giving vent to a thunderous bedlam of excited growls and yelps which, from the older infants, were Translated into shouts of "Dolly! Dolly! Nice dolly . . .!"

Springing upwards to avoid being trampled, Conway looked down on the milling mass of FROBs and felt the strong and sickening conviction that the luckless SRTT had departed this life. But no. The being had somehow managed to run—or squeeze—the gauntlet of stamping feet and eager, bludgeoning heads by keeping low and tightly pressed against the wall. It emerged battered but still in the shape which it had, chameleon-like, adopted in the mistaken idea that a tiny version of an FROB would be safe.

Conway called, "Quickly! Grab!"

But Prilicla was not sleeping on its job. The massive jaws of the grab were already hanging open above the dazed and slow-moving SRTT, and as Conway shouted they dropped and crashed shut. Conway sprang for one of the lifting cables and as they rose from the floor together he said hurriedly, "You're safe now. Relax. I'm here to help you . . ."

His reply was a sharp convulsion of the SRTT which nearly shook him loose, and suddenly the being had become a thing of lithe, oily convolutions which slipped between the fingers of the grab and slapped onto the floor. The FROBs hooted excitedly and charged again.

It could not possibly survive this time, Conway thought with a mixture of horror, pity and impatience ; this being who had had one fright on arrival and who had not stopped running yet, and who was still too utterly terrified even to be helped. The grab was useless but there was one other possibility. O'Mara would probably skin him alive for it, but he would at least be saving the SRTT's life for the time being if he allowed it to escape.

On the wall opposite the entry lock which Prilicla and himself had used was the door through which the FROB patients were brought to the ward. It was a simple door because the corridor outside it, which led to the FROB operating theatre, was maintained at the same level of gravity and pressure as was the ward. Conway dived across the intervening space to the controls and slid it open, watching the SRTT—who was not so insensible with fear that it missed seeing this way of escape—as it slithered through. He closed it again just in time to prevent some of the patients from getting out as well, then made for the control cupola to report the whole ghastly mess to O'Mara.

For the situation was now much worse than they all had thought. While he had been at the other end of the ward he had seen something which increased the difficulties of catching and pacifying the runaway many, many times, and which explained the visitor's lack of response to him while in the grab. It had been the shattered, trampled ruin of the SRTT's translator pack.

Conway's hand was on the intercom switch when Prilicla said, "Excuse me, sir, but does my ability to detect your emotions cause you mental distress? Or does mentioning aloud what I may have found trouble you?"

"Eh? What?" said Conway. He thought that he must be radiating impatience at a furious rate at the moment, because his assistant had picked a great time to start asking questions like *that*! His first impulse was to cut the other off, but then he decided that delaying his report to O'Mara by a few seconds would not make any difference, and possibly Prilicla considered the matter important. Aliens were funny.

"No to both questions," Conway replied shortly. "Though in the second instance I might be embarrassed if you made known your findings to a third party in certain circumstances. Why do you ask?"

"Because I have been aware of your deep anxiety regarding the possible depredations of this SRTT among your patients," Prilicla said, "and I am loath to further increase that anxiety by telling you of the type and intensity of the emotions which I detected just now in the being's mind."

Conway sighed. "Spit it out, things couldn't be much worse than they are now . . ."

But they could, and were.

When Prilicla finished speaking Conway pulled his hand away from the intercom switch as though it had grown teeth and bit him. "I can't tell him *that* over the intercom!" he burst out. "It would be sure to leak to the patients and if they, or even some of the Staff knew about it, there would be a panic." He dithered wildly for a moment, then cried, "Come on, we've got to see O'Mara!"

But the Chief Psychologist was not in his office or in the nearby Educator room, however information supplied by one of his assistants sent them hurrying to the forty-seventh level and Observation Ward Three.

This was a vast, high-ceilinged room maintained at a pressure and temperature suited to warm-blooded oxygen-breathers. DBDG, DBLF and FGLI doctors carried out preliminary examinations here on the more puzzling or exotic cases—the patients, if these atmospheric conditions did not suit them, being housed in large, transparent cubicles spaced at intervals around the walls and floor. It was known irreverently as the Punch and Ponder department and Conway, could see a group of medics of all shapes and species gathered around a glass-walled tank in the middle of the ward. This must be the older and dying SRTT he had heard about, but he had no attention to spare for anything until he had spoken to O'Mara.

He caught sight of the psychologist at a communications desk beside the wall and hurried over.

While he talked O'Mara listened stolidly, several times opening his mouth as though to interrupt, then each time closing it in a grimmer, tighter line. But when Conway reached the point where he had seen the broken Translator, O'Mara waved him to silence and hit the intercom switch with the same jerky motion of his hand.

"Get me Engineering Division, Colonel Skempton," he barked. Then: "Colonel, our runaway is in the FROB

nursery area. But there is a complication, I'm afraid—it has lost its Translator . . .” There was a short pause, then : “Neither do I know how I expect you to pacify it when you can't communicate, but do what you can in the meantime—I'm going to work on the communication angle now.”

He snapped the switch off and then on again, and said, “Colinson, in Communications . . . hello, Major. I want a relay between here and the Monitor Survey team on the SRTT's home planet—yes, the one I had you collecting about a few hours ago. Will you arrange that. And have them prepare a sound tape in the SRTT native language—I'll give you the wording I want in a moment—and have them relay it here. The substance of the speech, which must be obtained from an adult SRTT, will have to be roughly as follows—”

He broke off as Major Colinson's voice erupted from the speaker. The communications man was reminding a certain desk-bound head-shrinker that the SRTT planet was half way across the Galaxy, that sub-space radio was susceptible to interference just like any other kind and that by the time every sun in the intervening distance had splattered the signal with their share of static it would be virtually unintelligible.

“Have them repeat the signal,” O'Mara said. “There are sure to be usable words and phrases which we can piece together to reconstruct the original message. We need this thing badly, and I'll tell you why . . .”

The SRTT species were an extremely long-lived race, O'Mara explained quickly, who reproduced hermaphroditically at very great intervals and with great pain and effort. There was therefore a bond of great affection and—what was more important in the present circumstances—discipline between the adults and children of the species. There was also the belief, so strong as to be almost a certainty, that no matter what changes a member of this species worked it would always try to retain the vocal and aural organs which allowed it to communicate with its fellows.

Now if one of the adults on the home planet could prepare a few general remarks directed towards youths who misbehaved when they ought to have known better, and these were relayed to Sector General and in turn played over the PA to their runaway visitor, then the young SRTT's ingrained obedience to its elders would do the rest.

" . . . And that," said O'Mara to Conway as he switched off, "should take care of that little crisis. With any luck we'll have our visitor quietened down within a few hours. So your troubles are over, you can relax . . ."

The psychologist broke off at the expression on Conway's face, then he said softly, "There's more?"

Conway nodded. Indicating his assistant he said, "Dr. Prilicla detected it, by empathy. You must understand that the runaway is in a very bad way psychologically—grief for its dying parent, the fright it received at Lock Six when everyone came charging at it, and now the mauling it has undergone in the FROB nursery. It is young, immature, and these experiences have thrown it back to the stage where its responses are purely animal and . . . well . . ." Conway licked dry lips. ". . . has anyone calculated how long it has been since that SRTT has eaten?"

The implications of the question were not lost on O'Mara either. He paled suddenly and snatched up the intercom mike again. "Get me Skempton again, quickly! . . . Skempton? . . . Colonel, I am not trying to sound melodramatic but would you use the scrambler attached to your set, there is another complication . . ."

Turning away, Conway debated with himself whether to go over for a brief look at the dying SRTT or hurry back to his section. Back in the FROB nursery Prilicla had detected in the runaway's mind strong hunger radiation as well as the expected fear and confusion, and it had been the communication of these findings which had caused first Conway, then O'Mara and Skempton to realise just what a deadly menace the visitor had become. The youths of any species are notoriously selfish, cruel and uncivilised, Conway knew, and driven by steadily increasing pangs of hunger this one would certainly turn cannibal. In its present confused mental state the young SRTT would probably not know that it had done so, but that fact would make no difference at all to the patients concerned.

If only the majority of Conway's charges were not so small, defenceless and . . . tasty.

On the other hand a look at the elder being might suggest some method of dealing with the younger—his curiosity regarding the SRTT terminal case having nothing to do with it, of course . . .

He was manoeuvring for a closer look at the patient inside the tank and at the same time trying not to jostle the Earth-human doctor who was blocking his view, when the man turned irritably and asked, "Why the blazes don't you climb up my back? . . . Oh, hello Conway. Here to contribute another uninformed wild guess, I suppose?"

It was Mannen, the doctor who had at one time been Conway's superior and was now a Senior Physician well on the way to achieving Diagnostician status. He had befriended Conway on his arrival at the hospital, Mannen had several times explained within Conway's hearing, because he had a soft spot for stray dogs, cats and interns. Currently he was allowed to retain permanently in his brain just three Educator tapes—that of a Tralthan specialist in micro-surgery and two belonging to surgeons of the low-gravity LSVO and MSVK species—so that for long periods of each day his reactions were quite human. At the moment he was eyeing Prilicla, who was skittering about on the fringe of the crowd, with raised eyebrows.

Conway began to give details regarding the character and accomplishments of his new assistant, but was interrupted by Mannen saying loudly, "That's enough, lad, you're beginning to sound like an unsolicited testimonial. A light touch and the empathic faculty will be a big help in your current line of work. I grant that. But then you always did pick odd associates; levitating balls of goo, insects, dinosaurs, and such like—all pretty peculiar people, you must admit. Except for that nurse on the twenty-third level, now I admire your taste there—"

"Are they making any headway with this case, sir?" Conway said, determinedly shunting the conversation back onto the main track again. Mannen was the best in the world, but he had the painful habit sometimes of pulling a person's leg until it threatened to come off at the hip.

"None," said Mannen. "And what I said about wild guesses is a fact. We're all making them here, and getting nowhere—ordinary diagnostic techniques are completely useless. Just look at the thing!"

Mannen moved aside for Conway, and a sensation as of a pencil being laid across his shoulder told him that Prilicla was behind him craning to see, too.

V

The being in the tank was indescribable for the simple reason that it had obviously been trying to become several different things at once when the dissolution had begun. There were appendages both jointed and tentacular, patches of scales, spines and leathery, wrinkled tegument together with the suggestion of mouth and gill openings, all thrown together in a gruesome hodge-podge. Yet none of the physiological details were clear because the whole flaccid mass was softened, eroded away, like a wax model left too long in the heat. Moisture oozed from the patient's body continuously and trickled to the floor of the tank, where the water level was nearly six inches deep.

Conway swallowed and said, "Bearing in mind the adaptability of this species, its immunity to physical damage and so on, and considering the wildly mixed-up state of its body, I should say that there may be a strong possibility that the trouble stems from psychological causes."

Mannen looked him up and down slowly with an expression of awe on his face, then said witheringly, "Psychological causes, hey? Amazing! Well, what else *could* cause a being who is immune both to physical damage and bacterial infection to get into this state except something wrong with its think tank? But perhaps you were going to be more specific?"

Conway felt his neck and ears getting warm. He said nothing.

Mannen grunted, then went on, "The water that it is melting into is just that, plus a few harmless organisms which are suspended in it. We've tried every method of physical and psychological treatment that we could think of, without results. At the moment someone is suggesting that we quick-freeze the patient, both to halt the melting and to give us more time to think of something else. This has been vetoed because in its present state such a course might kill the patient outright. We've had a couple of our telepathic life-forms try to tune to its mind with a view to straightening it out that way, and O'Mara has gone back to the dark ages to such a point that he has tried crude electro-shock therapy, but nothing works. Altogether we have brought, singly and acting in concert, the viewpoints of very nearly every species in the Galaxy, and still we can't get a line on what ails it . . ."

"If the trouble was psychological," put in Conway, "I should have thought that the telepaths—"

"No," said Mannen. "In this life-form the mind and memory function is evenly distributed throughout the whole body and not housed in a permanent brain casing, otherwise it could not accomplish such marked changes in its physical structure. At present the being's mind is withdrawing, draining away, into smaller and smaller units—so small that the telepaths cannot work them.

"This SRTT is a real weirdie," Mannen continued thoughtfully. "It evolved out of the sea, of course, but later its world saw outbreaks of volcanic activity, earthquakes—the surface being coated with sulphur and who knows what else—and finally a minor instability in their sun converted the planet into the desert which it now is. They had to be adaptable to survive all that. And their method of reproduction—a budding and splitting-off process which causes the loss of a sizable portion of the parent's mass—is interesting, too, because it means that the embryo is born with part of the body-and-brain cell structure of the parent. No conscious memories are passed to the newly-born but it retains unconsciously the memories which enable it to adapt—"

"But that means," Conway burst out, "that if the parent transfers a section of its body-and-mind to the off-spring, then each individual's unconscious memory must go back—"

"And it is the unconscious which is the seat of all psychoses" interrupted O'Mara, who had come up behind them at that point. "Don't say anymore, I have nightmares at the very idea. Imagine trying to analyse a patient whose subconscious mind goes back fifty thousand years . . . !"

The conversation dried up quickly after that and Conway, still anxious about the younger SRTT's activities, hurried back to the nursery section. The whole area was infested with Maintencemen and green-uniformed Monitors, but the runaway had not been sighted again. Conway placed a DBDG nurse—the one Mannen was so fond of pulling his leg about, strangely enough—on duty in a diving suit at the AUGL ward, because he was expecting developments there at any time, and prepared with Prilicla to pay a call on the methane nursery.

Their work among the frigid-blooded beings in that ward was also routine, and during it Conway pestered Prilicla with

questions about the emotional state of the elder SRTT they had just left. But the GLNO was very little help ; all it would say was that it had detected an urge towards dissolution which it could not describe more fully to Conway because there was nothing in its own previous experience which it could relate the feeling to.

Outside again they discovered that Colinson had wasted no time. From the wall annunciators there poured out a staccato howl of static through which could be dimly heard an alien gobbling which was presumably the SRTT sound tape. Conway thought that if positions were reversed and he was a frightened small boy listening to a voice striving to speak to him through that incredible uproar, he would feel anything but reassured. And the atmosphere of the SRTT's home planet would almost certainly be of a different density to this one, which would further increase the distortion of the voice. He did not say anything to Prilicla, but Conway thought that it would be nothing less than a miracle if this cacaphony produced the result which O'Mara had intended.

The racket cut off suddenly, was replaced by a voice in English which droned out, "Would Dr. Conway please go to the intercom," then it returned unabated. Conway hurried to the nearest set.

"This is Murchison in the AUGL lock, Doctor," said a worried female voice. "Somebody—I mean something—just went past me into the main ward. I thought it was you at first until it began opening the inner seal without putting on a suit, then I knew it must be the runaway SRTT." She hesitated, then said, "Considering the state of the patients inside I didn't give the alarm until checking with you, but I can call—"

"No, you did quite right, Nurse," Conway said quickly. "We'll be down at once."

When they arrived at the lock five minutes later the nurse had a suit ready for Conway, and the combination of physiological features which made it impossible for the Earth-human members of the Staff to regard Murchison with anything like a clinical detachment were rendered slightly less distracting by her own protective suit. But Conway had eyes at the moment only for the inner inspection window and the thing which floated just inside it.

It was, or had been, very like Conway. The hair colouring was right, also the complexion, and it was in whites. But the features were out of proportion and ran together in a way that was quite horrible, and the neck and hands did not go into the tunic, they *became* the collar and sleeves of the garment. Conway was reminded of a lead figure that had been crudely fashioned and carelessly painted.

At the moment Conway knew that it was not a threat to the lives of the ward's tiny patients, but it was changing. There was a slow growing together of the arms and legs, a lengthening out and the sprouting of long, narrow protuberances which could only be the beginnings of fins. The AUGL patients might be difficult for an Earth-human DBDG to catch, but the SRTT was adapting to water also, and speed.

"Inside !" said Conway urgently. "We've got to herd it out of here before it—"

But Prilicla was making no attempt to begin the bodily contortions which would bring it inside its protective envelope. "I have detected an interesting change in the quality of its emotional radiation," the GLNO said suddenly. "There is still fear and confusion present, and an over-riding hunger . . ."

"Hunger . . . !" Murchison had not realised until then just what deadly danger the patients were in.

" . . . But there is something else," Prilicla continued, disregarding the interruption. "I can only describe it as a background pleasure sensation coupled with that same urge towards dissolution which I detected a short time ago in its parent. But I am puzzled to account for this sudden change."

Conway's mind was on his three tiny patients, and the predatory form the SRTT was beginning to take. He said impatiently, "Probably because recent events have affected its sanity also, the pleasure trace being due possibly to a liking for the water—"

Abruptly he stopped, his mind racing too fast for words or even ordered logical thought. Rather it was a feverish jumble of facts, experiences and wild guesswork which boiled chaotically through his brain, then incredibly became still and cool and very, very clear as . . . the answer.

And yet none of the tremendous intellects in the observation ward could have found it, Conway was sure, because they were not present with an empathic assistant when a young SRTT close to insanity through fear and grief had been immersed suddenly in the tepid, yellow depths of the AUGL tank . . .

When an intelligent, mature and mentally complex being encounters unpleasant and hurtful facts of sufficient numbers and severity the result is a retreat from reality. First a striving to return to the simple, unworrisome days of childhood and then, when that period turns out to be not nearly so carefree and uncomplicated as remembered, the ultimate retreat into the womb and the motionless, mindless condition of the catatonic. But to a mature SRTT the foetal position of catatonia could not be simple to attain, because its reproductive system was such that instead of the unborn off-spring being in a state of warm, mindless comfort, it found itself part of its parent's mature adult body and called upon to share in the decisions and adjustments its parent had to make. Because the SRTT body, every single cell of it, was the mind and any sort of separation was impossible to a life-form whose every cell was interchangeable.

How divide a glass of water without pouring some off into another container?

The diseased intellect would be forced to retreat again and again, only to find that it had become involved in endless changes and adaptations in its efforts to return to this non-existent womb. It would go back—far, far back—until it eventually did find the mindless state which it craved and its mind, which was inseparable from its body, became the warm water teeming with unicellular life from which it had originally evolved.

Now Conway knew the reason for the slow, melting dissolution of the terminal case upstairs. More, he thought he saw a way of solving the whole horrible mess. If he could only bank on the fact that, as was the case with most other species, a complex, mature mind tended to go insane faster than an undeveloped and youthful one . . .

He was only vaguely aware of going to the intercom again and calling O'Mara, and of Murchison and Prilicla drawing closer to him as he talked. Then he was waiting for what seemed like hours for the Chief Psychologist to absorb the information and react. Finally:

"An ingenious theory, Doctor," said O'Mara warmly. "More than that—I would say that that is exactly what has happened here, and no theorising about it. The only pity is that understanding what has happened does nothing to aid the patient—"

"I've been thinking about that, too," Conway broke in eagerly, "and the way I see it the runaway is the most urgent

problem now—if it isn't caught and pacified soon there are going to be serious casualties among the Staff and patients, in my section anyway if nowhere else. Unfortunately, for technical reasons, your idea of calming it by means of a sound tape in its own language is not very successful up to now . . ."

"That's putting it kindly," said O'Mara drily.

" . . . But," went on Conway, "if this idea was modified so that the runaway was spoken to, reassured, by its parent upstairs. If we first cured the elder SRTT—"

"Cured the elder! What the blazes do you think we've been trying to do this past three weeks?" O'Mara demanded angrily. Then as the realisation came that Conway was not trying to be funny or wilfully stupid, that he sounded in deadly earnest, he said flatly, "Keep talking, Doctor."

Conway kept talking. When he had finished the intercom speaker registered the sound of a great, explosive sigh, then : "I think you've got the answer all right, and we've certainly got to try it despite the risks you mentioned," O'Mara said excitedly. Then abruptly his tones became clipped and efficient. "Take charge down there, Doctor. You know what you want done better than anyone else does. And use the DBLF recreation room on level fifty-nine—it's close to your section and can be evacuated quickly. We're going to tap in on the existing communications circuits so there will be no delay here, and the special equipment you want will be in the DBLF recreation room inside fifteen minutes. So you can start anytime, Conway . . ."

Before he was cut off he heard O'Mara begin issuing instructions to the effect that all Monitor Corps personnel and Staff in the nursery section were to be placed at the disposal of Doctors Conway and Prilicla, and he had barely turned away from the set before green-uniformed Monitors began crowding into the lock.

VI

The SRTT youth had somehow to be forced into the DBLF recreation room which was rapidly being booby-trapped for its benefit, and the first step was to get it out of the AUGL ward. This was accomplished by twelve Monitors swimming, sweating and cursing furiously in their heavy issue suits who chased awkwardly after it until they had it hemmed in at the point where the entry lock gave it the only avenue of escape.

Conway, Prilicla and another bunch of Monitors were waiting in the corridor outside when it came through, all garbed against any one of half a dozen environments through which the chase might lead them. Murchison had wanted to go, too—she had wanted to be in at the kill, she had stated—but Conway had told her sharply that her job was watching over the three AUGL patients and that she had better do just that.

He had not meant to lose his temper with Murchison like that, but he was on edge. If the idea he had been so enthusiastic about to O'Mara did not pan out there was a very good chance that there would be two incurable SRTT patients instead of one, and "In at the kill" had been an unfortunate choice of words.

The runaway had changed again—a semi-involuntary defence mechanism triggered off by the shapes of its pursuers—into a vaguely Earth-human form. It ran soggily along the corridor on legs which were too rubbery and which bent in the wrong places, and the scaly, dun-coloured tegument it had worn in the AUGL tank was twitching and writhing and smoothing out into the pink and white of flesh and medical tunic. Conway could look on the most alien beings imaginable suffering from the most horrible maladies without inward distress, but the sight of the SRTT trying to become a human being as it ran made him fight to retain his lunch.

A sudden sideways dash into an MSVK corridor took them unawares and resulted in a kicking, floundering pile-up of pursuers beyond the inner seal of the connecting lock. The MSVK life-form were tri-pedal, vaguely stork-like beings who required an extremely low gravity pull, and the DBDGs like Conway could not adjust to it immediately. But while Conway was still slowly falling all over the place the Monitors' space training enabled them to find their feet quickly. The SRTT was headed off into the oxygen section again.

It had been a bad few minutes while it lasted, Conway thought with relief, because the dim lighting and the opacity of the fog which the MSVKs' called an atmosphere would have made the SRTT difficult to find if it had been lost to sight. If that had happened at this stage . . . Well, Conway preferred not to think about that.

But the DBLF recreation room was only minutes away now, and the SRTT was heading straight for it. The being was changing again, into something low and heavy which

moved on all fours. It seemed to be drawing itself in, condensing, and there was a suggestion of a carapace forming. It was still in that condition when two Monitors, yelling and waving their arms wildly, dashed suddenly out of an intersection and stampeded it into the corridor which contained the recreation room . . .

. . . And found it empty !

Conway swore luridly. There should have been half a dozen monitors strung across that corridor to bar its way, but he had made such good time getting here that they were not in position yet. They were probably still inside the rec room placing their equipment, and the SRTT would go right past the doorway.

But he had not counted on the quick mind and even more agile body of Prilicla. His assistant must have realised the position in the same instant that he did. The little GLNO ran clicking down the corridor, rapidly overtaking the SRTT, then swinging up onto the ceiling until it had passed the runaway before dropping back. Conway tried to yell a warning, tried to shout that a fragile GLNO had no chance of heading off a being who had now the characteristics of an outsize and highly mobile armoured crab, and that Prilicla was committing suicide. Then he saw what his assistant was aiming at.

There was a powered stretcher-carrier in its alcove about thirty feet ahead of the fleeing SRTT. He saw Prilicla skid to a halt beside it, hit the starter, then charge on. Prilicla was not being stupidly brave, it was being brainy and fast which was much better in these circumstances.

The stretcher-carrier, uncontrolled, lurched into motion and went wobbling across the corridor—right into the path of the charging SRTT. There was a metallic crash and a burst of dense yellow and black smoke as its heavy batteries shattered and shorted across. Before the fans could quite clear the air the Corpsmen were able to work around the stunned and nearly motionless runaway and herd it into the recreation room.

A few minutes later a Monitor officer approached Conway. He gave a jerk of his head which indicated the weird assortment of gadgetry which had been rushed to the compartment only minutes ago and which lay in neat piles around the room, and included the greenclad men ranged solidly against the walls—all facing towards the centre of the big compartment

where the SRTT rotated slowly in the exact centre of the floor, seeking a way of escape. Quite obviously he was eaten up with curiosity, but his tone was carefully casual as he said, "Dr. Conway, I believe? Well, Doctor, what do you want us to do now?"

Conway moistened his lips. Up to now he had not thought much about this moment—he had thought that it would be easy to do this because the young SRTT had been such a menace to the hospital in general and caused so much trouble in his own section in particular. But now he was beginning to feel sorry for it. It was, after all, only a kid who had been sent out of control by a combination of grief, ignorance and panic. If this thing did not turn out right . . .

He shook off the feelings of doubt and inadequacy and said harshly, "You see that beastie in the middle of the room. I want it scared to death."

He had to elaborate, of course, but the Monitors got the idea very quickly and began using the equipment which had been sent them with great fervour and enthusiasm. Watching grimly, Conway identified items from Air Supply, Communications and the various diet kitchens, all being used for a purpose for which they had never been designed. There were things which emitted shrill whistles, siren howls of tremendous volumes and others which consisted simply of banging two metal trays together. To this fearful racket was added the whoops of the men wielding these noisemakers.

And there was no doubt that the SRTT was scared—Prilicla reported its emotional reactions constantly. But it was not scared enough.

"Quiet!" yelled Conway suddenly. "Start using the silent stuff!"

The preceding din had only been a primer. Now would come the really vicious stuff—but silent, because any noise made by the SRTT had to be heard.

Flares burst around the shaking figure in the middle of the floor, blindingly incandescent but of negligible heat. Simultaneously tractor and pressor beams pushed and pulled at it, sliding it back and forth across the floor, occasionally tossing it into mid-air or flattening it against the ceiling. The beams worked on the same principle as the gravity neutraliser belts, but were capable of much finer control and focus. Other beam operators began flinging lighted flares at the suspended, wildly

struggling figure, only yanking them back or turning them aside at the last possible moment.

The SRTT was really frightened now, so frightened that even non-empaths could feel it. The shapes it was taking were going to give Conway nightmares for many weeks to come.

Conway lifted a hand mike to his lips and flicked the switch. "Any reaction up there yet?"

"Nothing yet," O'Mara's voice boomed from the speakers which had been set up around the room. "Whatever you're doing at the moment you'll have to step it up."

"But the being is in a condition of extreme distress . . ." began Prilicla.

Conway rounded on his assistant. "If you can't take it, leave!" he snapped.

"Steady, Conway," O'Mara's voice came sharply. "I know how you must feel, but remember that the end result will cancel all this out . . ."

"But if it doesn't work," Conway protested, then: "Oh, never mind." To Prilicla he said, "I'm sorry." To the officer beside him he asked, "Can you think of any way of putting on more pressure?"

"I'd hate anything like this being done to me," said the Monitor tightly, "but I would suggest adding spin. Some species are utterly demoralised by spin when they can take practically anything else . . ."

Spin was added to the pummelling which the SRTT was already undergoing with the pressors—not a simple spin, but a wild, rolling, pitching movement which made Conway's stomach feel queasy just by looking at it, and the flares dived and swooped around it like insane moons around their primary. Quite a few of the men had lost their first enthusiasm, and Prilicla swayed and shook on its six pipe-stem legs, in the grip of an emotional gale which threatened to blow it away.

It had been wrong to bring Prilicla in on this, Conway told himself angrily; no empath should have to go through this sort of hell by proxy. He had made a mistake from the very first, because the whole idea was cruel and sadistic and *wrong*. He was worse than a monster . . .

High in the centre of the room the twisting, spinning blur that was the younger SRTT began to emit a high-pitched and terrified gobbling noise.

A crashing bedlam erupted from the wall speakers ; shouts, cries, breaking noises and the sounds of running feet overlaying that of something slower and infinitely heavier. They could hear O'Mara's voice shouting out some sort of explanation to somebody at the top of his lungs, then an unidentified voice yelled at them, " For pete's sake stop it down there ! Buster's papa has woke up and is wrecking the joint . . . ! "

Quickly but gently they checked the spinning SRTT and lowered it to the floor, then they waited tensely while the shouting and crashing being relayed to them from Observation Ward Three reached a crescendo and began gradually to die down. Around the room men stood motionless watching each other, or the whimpering being on the floor, or the wall speakers, waiting. And then it came.

The sound was similar to the alien gobbling which had been relayed through the annunciators some hours previously, but without the accompanying roar of static, and because everyone had their Translators switched on the words also came through as English.

It was the elder SRTT, incurable no longer because it was phsychically whole again, speaking both reassuringly and chidingly to its erring off-spring. In effect it was saying that junior had been a bad boy, that he must cease forthwith running around and getting himself and everyone else into a state, and that nothing else unpleasant would happen to him if he did as he was told by the beings now surrounding him. The sooner it did these things, the elder SRTT ended, the sooner they could both go home.

Mentally, the runaway had taken a terrible beating, Conway knew. Maybe it had taken too much. Tense with anxiety he watched it—still in a shape that was neither fish, flesh nor fowl—begin humping its way across the floor. When it began gently and submissively to butt one of the watching Monitors in the knees, the cheer that went up very nearly gave it a relapse.

" When Prilicla here gave me the clue to what was troubling the elder SRTT, I was sure that the cure would have to be drastic," Conway said to the Diagnosticians and Senior Physicians ranged around and behind O'Mara's desk.

The fact that he was seated in such august company was a sure sign of the approval in which he was held, but despite

that he still felt nervous as he went on. "Its regression towards the—to it—foetal state—complete dissolution into individual and unthinking cells floating in the primeval ocean—was far advanced, perhaps too far judging by its physical state. Major O'Mara had already tried various shock treatments which it, with its fantastically adaptable cell structure, was able to negate or ignore. My idea was to use the close physical and emotional bond which I discovered existed between the SRTT adult and their last-born off-spring, and get at it that way."

Conway paused, his eyes drifting sideways briefly to take in the shambles around them. Observation Ward Three looked as though a bomb had hit it, and Conway knew that there had been a rather hectic few minutes here between the time the elder SRTT had come out of its catatonic state and the explanations had been given it. He cleared his throat and went on :

"So we trapped the young one in the DBLF recreation room and tried to frighten it as much as possible, piping the sounds it made up here to the parent. It worked. The elder SRTT could not lie doing nothing while its latest and most loved off-spring was apparently in frightful danger, and parental concern and affection overcame and destroyed the psychosis and forced it back to present time and reality. It was able to pacify the young one, and so all concerned were left happy."

"A nice piece of deductive reasoning on your part, Doctor," said O'Mara warmly. "You are to be commended. So much so that it has been decided to pay you a considerable professional compliment . . ." O'Mara's mouth quirked faintly and the look in his eyes became one of amused sympathy, ". . . by giving you first crack at the patient which is at this moment preparing to enter by Lock Sixteen."

"The patient," he added drily, "is another SRTT, so you had better hurry . . ."

A matter of minutes later Conway and Prilicla were inside Lock Sixteen, the indicator lights informing them that the ship carrying the patient was hooked on. It was a Monitor ship doing the ambulance duty, and Conway used the communicator beside the lock to call the ship's pilot. He was still feeling stunned, bewildered and a little cheated by what had been sprung on him—certainly he felt anything but complimented at the moment !

He said, "The receiving doctor here. What sort of shape is the patient in?"

"What shape?" came the reply. "Oh, brother . . .!"

At that moment the big inner seal opened and a loose, yellow, *something* rolled into the antechamber. It seemed to be composed of great masses of thin, moist, orange-yellow string and it rolled along like a vast, slow-moving tumbleweed. Or, thought Conway, *an ambulating hunk of spaghetti . . .!*

"Prilicla at Lock Sixteen," his assistant was saying into the intercom. "Send a stretcher-carrier down here at once, please. And . . . and bring a fork . . ."

James White

THE LITERARY LINE-UP

Kenneth Bulmer's new three-part serial "The Patient Dark" commences next month and readers will immediately notice the intriguing possibilities in the plot and how well he has handled them. Earth dominated by an alien race for two hundred and forty-seven years, the status quo frozen into the pattern of 1975 when Man first reached the Moon, and the hopeless resistance movement (part legend and part fact) which has been trained for generations against the great day of overthrow. It has more mystery and excitement than the author's previous serial "Green Destiny."

Lan Wright is back with the first of a new Johnny Dawson series. "Joker's Trick" is a long novelette in which Dawson becomes embroiled in the machinations of his old friend Hendrix. Short stories haven't yet been finalized but they will be up to our usual standard, of course.

Ratings for No. 80 were :

- | | | |
|---------------------------|-----------|-------------------|
| 1. A Man Called Destiny | - - - | Lan Wright |
| 2. Friday | - - - - - | John Kippax |
| 3. The Towers Of San Ampa | - | Brian W. Aldiss |
| 4. The Stuff Of Dreams | - - - | Donald Malcolm |
| 5. Earthman's Burden | - - - | Robert Silverberg |

Similar to Ray Bradbury, Damon Knight had his earlier literary works published in American fan magazines, being equally famous for publicising his name in lower case, thus "damon knight." Like many another celebrated American he has risen high—author, book reviewer, editor, and is one of the most controversial as well as popular writers on the other side of the Atlantic.

IDIOT STICK

By Damon Knight

The ship came down out of a blue sky to land in a New Jersey meadow. It sank squashily into the turf. It was about a mile long, coloured an iridescent blue-green, like the shell of a beetle.

A door opened, and a thin, stick-bodied man came out to sniff the cool air. The sky overhead was full of fluffy cumulus clouds and criss-crossing contrails. Across the river, the tall buildings of New York were picturesquely gilded by the early sun.

A dun-coloured Army copter came into view, circling the ship at a cautious distance. The stick man saw it, blinked at it without interest, and looked away.

The river was smooth and silvery in the sunlight. After a long time the sound of bullhorns came blaring distantly across the marshes. Then there was a clanking and a roaring, and two Army tanks pulled into sight, followed by two more. They deployed to either side, and slewed around with their 90 mm. guns pointing at the ship.

The alien watched them calmly. More helicopters appeared, circling and hovering. After a while a grey-painted destroyer steamed slowly into view up the river.

More tanks arrived. There was a ring of them around the spaceship, rumbling and smelling of diesel oil. Finally a staff car pulled up, and three perspiring general officers got out of it.

From his low platform the alien looked down with a patient expression. His voice carried clearly : " Good morning," he said, " this is a ship of the Galactic Federation. We come in peace ; your guns will not fire, please take them away. Now then. I shall tell you what I am going to do. The Federation wishes to establish a cultural and educational organization upon your continent ; and for your land and your co-operation, we will pay you generously. Here, catch these." He raised his arm, and a cloud of glittery objects came toward them.

One of the officers, white-faced, tugged at the pistol in his belt holster ; but the objects dropped harmlessly in and around the car. The eldest officer picked one up. It was insubstantial to the touch, more like a soap bubble than anything else. Then it tingled suddenly in his palm. He sat down, glassy-eyed.

The other two shook him. " Frank ! Frank !"

His eyes slowly cleared ; he looked from one to the other. " Are you still here ?" he said faintly, and then : " My God !"

" Frank, what was it ? Did it knock you out ?"

The eldest officer looked down at the glittery thing in his hand. It felt now like nothing in particular ; just a piece of plastic, perhaps. There was no more tingle. The zip was gone out of it.

" It was—happiness," he said.

The rest of the objects glittered and gleamed in the rank grass around the car. " Go on," called the alien encouragingly, " take all you want. Tell your superiors—tell your friends. Come one, come all ! We bring happiness !"

Within half a day, the word was out.

Work stopped in New York offices. By ferry and tube, people poured across the river. The governor flew in from Trenton and was closeted with the aliens for half an hour. He emerged with a dazed and disbelieving look, wearing a shoulder bag full of the glittering little capsules.

The crowd milled around the ship, muddying to the knee. Every hour the thin alien appeared and tossed out another

handful of capsules. There were shouts and screams ; the crowd clotted briefly where the capsules fell, then spread apart again like filings released from a magnet.

Dull, used-up capsules littered the grass. Everywhere you saw the dazed expression, the transported look of a man who had had one.

Some few of the capsules got carried home to wives and children. The word continued to spread. No one could describe the effect of the capsules satisfactorily. It lasted only a few seconds, yet seemed to take a long time. It left them satiated and shaken. It was not pleasure of any specific kind, they said. It was happiness and they wanted more.

Expropriation measures to give the aliens what they wanted passed the state and national legislatures with blinding speed. There was furious debate elsewhere, but nobody who had had one of the capsules was in any doubt that he was getting a bargain. And the kicker was, "What else can we do?"

The aliens, it appeared, wanted five hundred acres of level ground to put up certain buildings and other structures. Their explanations to the press and public were infrequent and off-hand in tone. Some people found them unsatisfactory. When asked why the aliens had chosen a site so near heavily populated centres, rather than wasteland which would have been plentiful elsewhere, the spokesman replied (he was either the same stick-thin man who had appeared first, or one just like him) : "But then who would build us our buildings?"

New York, it seemed, represented a source of native labour to the aliens.

The pay would be generous : three capsules a day a man.

When the aliens announced they were hiring, half the population of New York tried to get over onto the Jersey flats. Three-quarters of the population of Hoboken, Jersey City, Hackensack and Paterson was already there.

In the queues that eventually formed out of the confusion, the mayor of New York City was seen alongside an upstate senator and two visiting film stars.

Each person, as he reached the head of the line, was handed a light metal or plastic rod, five feet long, with a curved handle and a splayed tip. The lucky workers were then herded out out onto the designated acreage. Some of it was marshland, some was a scraggly part of the New Jersey parks system, some was improved land. The buildings on the site, a few homes, some factories and warehouses, had all been evacuated but not

torn down. The workers with their rods were lined up at one edge of this territory, facing the opposite side.

"When the command 'Go' is heard," said the alien's voice clearly, "you will all proceed directly forward at a slow walking pace, swinging your sticks from side to side."

The voice stopped. Apparently that was going to be all.

In the middle of the line, young Ted Cooley looked at his neighbour, Eli Baker. They both worked in the same pharmaceuticals house, and had come out together to try their luck. Cooley was twenty-five, blonde and brawny; Baker, about the same age, was slight and dark. Their eyes met, and Baker shrugged, as if to say, *Don't ask me.*

It was a clear, cool day. The long line of men and women stood waiting in the sunlight.

"Go!" said the alien's voice.

The line began to move.

Cooley stepped forward and waggled his stick hesitantly. There was no feeling of movement in the stick, but he saw a line of darkness spring out on the ground ahead of him. He paused instinctively, thinking that the stick must be squirting oil or some other liquid.

Up and down the line, other people were stopping, too. He looked more closely, and saw that the ground was not wet at all. It was simply pressed down flat, dirt, stones, weeds, everything all at once, to form one hard, dark surface.

"Keep going," said the alien's voice.

Several people threw down their sticks and walked away. Others moved forward cautiously. Seeing that nothing happened to them when they stepped on the dark strip, Cooley moved forward also. The dark ground was solid and firm underfoot. As he moved forward, swinging the stick, the dark area spread; and looking closely now, he could see the uneven ground leap downward and darken as the stick swept over it.

"Get in rhythm," called the voice. "Leave no space between one man's work and the next."

The line moved forward, a little raggedly at first, then faster as they got the hang of it. The dark, hard strip, running the whole length of the area, widened as they moved. Everything under the business end of the stick was instantly compressed and smoothed down. Looking closely, you could see the traces of anything that had been there before, like the patterns in marbled linoleum: stones, sticks, grass and weeds.

"How the heck does it work?" said Baker, awed.

"Search me," said Cooley. In his hands, the tube felt light and empty, like the aluminium shaft of a tank vacuum cleaner. He didn't see how it could possibly have any mechanism inside. There were no controls; he hadn't turned anything on to make it operate.

A few yards ahead there was a stone wall, overgrown with weeds. "What's going to happen when we come to that?" Baker asked, pointing.

"Search me." Cooley felt bewildered; he walked mechanically forward, swinging the stick.

The wall grew nearer. When they were within a few paces of it, a rabbit burst suddenly out of cover. It darted one way, then the other, hind legs pumping hard. Confused by the advancing line, it leaped for the space between Baker and Cooley.

"Look out!" shouted Cooley instinctively. Baker's swinging stick went directly over the rabbit.

Nothing happened. The rabbit kept on going.

Cooley and a few others turned to watch it. It bounded away across the level strip, and disappeared into the tall grass on the other side.

Baker and Cooley looked at each other. "Selective," said Cooley through dry lips. "Listen, if I—" He shortened his grip on the stick, moving the splayed end toward himself.

"Better not," said Baker nervously.

"Just to see—" Cooley slowly brought the stick nearer, slowly thrust the tip of one shoe under it.

Nothing happened.

He moved the stick nearer. Bolder, he ran it over his leg, his other foot. Nothing. "Selective!" he repeated. "But how?"

The weeds were dried vegetable fiber. The stick compressed them without hesitation, stamped them down flat like everything else. His trousers were dried vegetable fiber, part of them, anyhow—cotton. His socks, his shoelaces—how did the stick know the difference?

They kept on going.

When they came to the stone wall, Cooley waved his stick at it. A section of the wall slumped, as if a giant had taken a bite out of it. He waved it again.

The rest of the wall fell.

Somebody laughed hysterically. The line was advancing. The wall was just a lighter stripe in the smooth floor over which they walked.

The sun crept higher. Behind the line of men and women stretched a level, gleaming floor. "Listen," said Cooley nervously to Baker, "how bad do you want those happiness gadgets?"

Baker looked at him curiously. "I don't know, what do you mean?"

Cooley moistened his lips. "I'm thinking. We get the gadgets, we use them up—"

"Or sell them," Baker interrupted.

"Or sell them, but then either way, they're gone. Suppose we walked off with *these*." He hefted his stick. "If we could find out what makes it do what it does—"

"Are you kidding?" said Baker. His dark face was flushed; beads of sweat stood out on his forehead. He waved his stick. "You know what this is? A shovel. An idiot stick."

"How's that?" said Cooley.

"A shovel," Baker told him patiently, "is a stick with some dirt on one end and an idiot on the other. Old joke. Didn't you ever do any common labour?"

"No," said Cooley.

"Well, you're doing some now. This thing that looks so wonderful to us—that's just a shovel, to them. An idiot stick. And we're the idiots."

"I don't like that," said Cooley.

"Who likes it?" Baker demanded. "But there isn't a thing you can do about it. Do your work, take your pay, and that's all. Don't kid yourself we can ever get the bulge on them. We haven't got what it takes."

Cooley thought hard about it, and was one of the fifty-odd people who walked off the site with Galactic tools that day. The Galactics made no complaint. When daylight failed, they called the first crew in and sent another out, under lights that floated overhead.

The work went on around the clock. The tools were stolen at a steady rate; the Galactics handed out more indifferently.

The site became level and smooth. The surface was glassy-hard, almost too slick to walk on. The next thing the aliens did was to set up a tall pole on a tripod in the middle of the

site. Most of the floating lights went out and drifted away. In the dusk, a network of fluorescent lines appeared on the glassy surface. It looked like the ground plan for a huge building. Some of the pale lines went a little askew because of minor irregularities in the surface, but the Galactics did not seem to mind.

They called in part of the crew and made some adjustment in each man's stick. A narrow tab, something like the clip in an automatic, came out of the butt. A different one went in.

So equipped, the reduced crew was sent back onto the site, and scattered along the diagram, one man every few hundred yards or so. They were instructed to walk backwards along the lines, drawing their sticks after them.

There was some confusion. The tools now worked only on contact, and instead of flattening the surface down, they made it bulge up, like suddenly rising dough, to form a foot-high ridge. The ridge was pale in colour, and felt porous and hard to the touch, like styrene foam.

A few men were called in and had still another set of control tabs put into their sticks. Wherever somebody had jumped, or twitched, and made a ridge where it didn't belong, these men wiped it out like wiping chalk with a wet sponge: the expanded material shrank again and became part of the dark surface.

Meanwhile, the rest of the crew, finishing the first set of lines, was walking along beside them, making the ridges twice as wide. They repeated this process until each ridge was nearly a yard across. Then they stepped up on top of the ridges and began again, making a second foot-high bulge on top of the first.

The building was going up.

It was irregularly shaped, a little like an arrowhead, with an outer shell composed of many small compartments. The interior was left unpartitioned, a single area more than half a mile across.

When the shell was up ten feet, the aliens had connecting doorways cut between all the small chambers. A stick, looking no different from the others, was tossed into each chamber from the wall above. Where it landed, clear liquid immediately began to gush. The liquid rose, covered the stick, kept on rising. It rose until it reached the level of the walls, and then stopped. A few minutes later, it was cold to the touch. In half an hour, it was frozen solid.

The control tabs were changed again, and a crew began walking across the frozen surface, forming another layer of the hard, dark, glassy substance. Afterward, more doorways were cut in the outer shell, and the liquid drained off toward the river. The sticks that had been dropped into each chamber were recovered. Each had left a slight irregularity in the floor, which was smoothed out.

The second story went up in the same way. Walking backward along the high walls, a good many people fell off. Others quit.

The aliens hired more and the construction went on.

Hardly anybody except a few high government officials got to see the inside of the alien spaceship; but the Galactics themselves became familiar sights in the towns and cities of the eastern seaboard.

They walked the streets in inquisitive, faintly supercilious pairs looking at everything, occasionally stopping to aim little fist-sized machines which might or might not have been cameras.

Some of them fraternized with the populace, asking many earnest questions about local laws and customs. Some bought vast quantities of potatoes, playing cards, Cadillacs, junk jewelry, carpets, confetti, nylons and other goods, paying as usual with the happiness capsules. They ate local foods with interest, and drank heroically—without getting drunk or even tipsy.

Skin-tight clothes cut in imitation of the Galactics' bottle-green uniform began to appear on the market. There were Galactic dolls, and Galactic spaceship toys.

Legislatures everywhere were relaxed and amiable. Wherever the Galactics had trouble, or sensed it coming, they smoothed the way with more of the happiness capsules. Prices were beginning to be marked not only in "\$" and "cents," but in "Hc," for "Hapcap."

Business was booming.

In the laboratories of the Bureau of Standards in Washington there was a concerted programme, one of many, to discover the secrets of the Galactic all-purpose tool. Specimens had been measured, X-rayed and cut apart. The material, whatever it was, seemed to have been formed in one piece. It was light,

chemically inert and fairly strong. The hollow inside was irregularly curved, according to no discernible principle.

There were only two parts—the tool proper, and the control tab which fitted into a slot in the handle. With the tab in, the tool functioned. It did work, while the dials of every test instrument indicated that no energy was being released.

With the tab out, nothing happened at all.

The tabs for various functions could be distinguished by colour. Otherwise, in shape and dimensions, they seemed identical.

The first—and last—breakthrough came when the tabs were examined by X-ray microscopy. The substance, which had seemed amorphous, was found to have a crystalline structure, permanently stressed in patterns which differed consistently between tabs that produced different functions.

By an elaborate series of test heatings, compressions and deformations, Dr. Crawford Reed succeeded in altering the stress pattern of a tab, type "A," to approximately that of a tab, type "C."

When the tab was inserted in a tool, the laboratory went up in an explosion that demolished buildings within a radius of three city blocks.

The explosion was recorded by instruments in the giant spaceship. When he saw the record, the bored officer on duty smiled.

One of the aliens, who said his name was Pendrath go Pendrath, showed up frequently in the pleasant little town of Riverdale, N.J. He poked his nose into church bazaars, Little League baseball games, soda fountains, summer camps, chamber of commerce meetings. At first he gathered crowds wherever he went ; then the natives, and even the tourists, got used to him.

Three nights after the rough shell of the building was finished, a young *Star-Ledger* reporter named Al Jenkins found him in the back of a bar, maudlin drunk.

Pendrath looked up as Jenkins slid into the booth next to him. "Ah, my friend," he said blurrily, "how I regret your poor planet."

"You don't like our planet?" said Jenkins.

"No, it is a nice little planet. Extremely picturesque. Pardon me." Pendrath sipped from the glass he was holding. He blinked, and straightened up slightly.

"You must understand, that is Galactic progress," he said. "It cannot be helped. We all must go some day."

Jenkins looked at him critically. "You've been having quite a few of those, haven't you?" he said. "I thought you people were immune to alcohol, or something."

"No, it is the aps—as—aspirin," said the alien. He produced a small bottle, and solemnly shook a tablet out into his palm. "Your liquors gave me a headache, and so I took an aspirin—aspirin. And your aspirin is wonderful." He looked lugubrious. "To think, no more aspirin. No more church bazaar. No more baseball."

"Why, what's going to happen to them?"

Pendrath spread his fingers and made an expressive fizzing noise with his mouth.

"Blooie," he said.

Jenkins said incredulously, "You're going to blow up the world?"

The alien nodded sadly. "Soon our building will be finished. Then we will put in the big machines, and drill, drill." He made twisting motions downward with one hand. "We will drill to the core. Then we will drop the transformer and close up the shaft. Then we will go away. Then your poor little planet will go—" He made the fizzing noise again. "Blooie."

Jenkins' fists were clenched. "But why? Why would you do a thing like that?"

"For dust," Pendrath explained. "Your little planet will all be dust. No big pieces left—nothing bigger than this." He pinched his thumb and forefinger together, squinting, to show how tiny. "We are making defenses for the Galaxy. This sector is too open. We will make a little screen of dust here. If there is dust, a ship cannot go very fast. The dust slows it down. Some places, there is already dust. Other places, we will make it. It is the only way to protect ourselves from invasion."

"Invasion by who?"

Pendrath shrugged. "Who can tell? We have to look ahead."

Jenkins' hands began to shake. He took a dog-eared notebook out of his pocket, thumbing it open automatically; looked at it and put it back. His hands didn't want to do anything but make fists. He said thickly, "You lousy—" and swung a left to Pendrath's beaky face.

The blow never landed.

His fist slowed down and stopped. Strain as hard as he would, he couldn't push it any farther.

"No, no," said Pendrath, smiling sadly. "No use. I regret very much."

Jenkins' heart was thumping. "Why us?" he burst out angrily. "If you had to have dust, why couldn't you take one of the other planets? Jupiter—Venus—any of them—why pick the one we live on?"

Pendrath blinked at him. "But on your other planets no one lives," he said. "Who then, would do the work for us?" He popped another tablet into his mouth. "And besides," he said, "remember that this dust will make a blanket around your sun. It will make the planets very cold. You see, I have thought of all these things. And then suppose we went to some other sun, and did not come here at all. It would be just the same. You would make big spaceships, and we would have to come and finish you anyway. This way, it will be very quick—you will not feel a thing."

Jenkins had lost his hat. He fumbled on the floor for it. "We'll stop you," he said, red-faced over the table top. "You'll be sorry you ever opened your mouth to me, mister. I'll spread this from here to Belfast."

"You are going to tell?" the alien asked, in dull surprise.

"You bet your sweet life I'm going to tell!"

Pendrath nodded owlishly. "It does not matter now. The work is nearly done. You cannot stop us, my poor friend."

The story broke the following day, when the installation of the complex system of girders and braces in the interior of the building had already been finished.

A hatch in the side of the ship was open. Under the aliens' direction, crews were carrying out a steady stream of machine parts to be assembled inside the building.

There were a thousand and one pieces of different sizes and shapes: gigantic torus sections, tubes, cylinders, globes; twisted pipes, jigsaw puzzle pieces. The material was not metal, but the same light substance the tools were made of.

Some of the tools were serving as grip-sticks: they clung like magnets to the machine parts, and to nothing else. Some, applied to massive pieces of equipment, made them extraordinarily slippery, so that it was easy to slide them across the site and into the building. Others were used in assembling:

drawn along the join between two pieces, they made the two flow together into one.

The story did not reach the day shift at all. The second and third shifts turned up a little under strength : the aliens hired enough people from the crowd of curiosity-seekers to make up the difference.

At his regular press conference, the alien spokesman, Mr. Revash go Ren, said. " Mr. Jenkins' story is a malicious fabrication. The machines you mention will provide pleasant heating, air conditioning, Galactic standard gravitation, and other necessary services for the clerical workers in our offices. We are accustomed to having many conveniences of this kind, and that is why we cannot live or work in buildings suitable for you."

Hersch of the *Times* demanded : " Why does that take a half-mile area, when your office space is only a thin ring around the outside of the building ?"

Revash smiled. " Why do you take a whole cellar to heat your buildings ?" he asked. " One of your savages would say that a fire of sticks and a hole in the ceiling are sufficient."

Hersch had no answer to that ; nevertheless, belief in the story spread.

By the end of the week, half a dozen newspapers were thumping the drum for a crusade. A congregational investigating committee was appointed. More workers quit. When the labour supply slackened, the aliens doubled the pay, and got more applicants than there were jobs. Riots broke out on the Jersey side of the tubes. There were picket lines, fulminations from the pulpit, attempts at sabotage.

The work went on just the same.

Baker said : " The whole problem is psychological. We know what kind of people they are—it sticks out all over them—they're decadent. That's their weak point. That's where we've got to hit them. They've got the perfect machines, but they don't know how to use them. Not only that, they don't want to, it would soil their lily-white hands. So they come here, and they get us to do their dirty work, even though it means an extra risk."

" That doesn't sound so decadent to me," said Cooley argumentatively. It was past midnight, and they were still sitting in Baker's living room over a case of beer, hashing it all out. Cooley's face was flushed, and his voice a little loud.

"Take an archaeological expedition, say—I don't know, maybe to Mesopotamia or somewhere. Do they drag along a lot of pick and shovel men? They do not. They take the shovels, maybe, but they hire native labour on the spot. That isn't decadence, that's efficiency."

"All right, but if we had to, we could get out there and pick up a shovel. They can't. It just wouldn't occur to them. They're over-refined, Ted. They've got to the point where the machines *have* to be perfect, or they couldn't stay alive. That's dangerous. That's where we've got to hit them."

"I don't see it. Wars are won with weapons."

"So what are we supposed to do, hit them with atom bombs that don't go off, or guns that don't shoot?"

Cooley put down his stein and reached for the tool that lay on the floor. It had rolled the last time he put it down. He said, "Damn," and reached farther. He picked it up, the same "idiot stick" he had stolen from the Galactic site the first day.

"I'm betting on this," he said. "You know and I know they're working on it, day and night. I'm betting they'll crack it. *This* is a weapon, boy. A Galactic weapon. If we just get that—"

"Go ahead, wish for the moon," said Baker bitterly. "What you're talking about happens to be impossible. We can change the stress patterns in the control tabs, yes. We can even duplicate the formative conditions, probably, and get as many tabs as you want with the same pattern. But it's all empirical, Ted, just blind chance. We don't know *why* such and such a stress pattern makes the tool do a certain thing. And until we know that, all we can do is vary it at random."

"So?"

"So there are millions of wrong patterns for every right one. There's the patterns that make things explode, like in Washington. There's the ones that boil the experimenter alive or freeze him solid. Or bury him in a big lump of solid lead. There's the radioactive ones, the corrosive ones—and for every wrong guess, we lose at least one man."

"Remote control?" said Cooley.

"First figure out what makes the tools operate when somebody's holding them, and stop when they let go."

Cooley drank, frowning.

"And remember," said Baker, "there's just about one choice that would do us any good against the Galactics. One

pattern, out of millions. No. It won't be technology that licks them—it'll be guts."

He was right. But he was wrong.

Al Jenkins was in the *Star-Ledger* city room, gloomily reading a wire story about denunciations of the aliens issued by governors of eight states.

"What good is that?" he said, tossing it back onto the city editor's desk. "Look at it."

Through the window, they could see the top of the alien building, shining in the distance. Tiny figures were crawling over the domed roof. The aliens had inflated a hemispherical membrane, and now the workers were going over it with the tools, forming a solid layer.

The dome was almost finished. Work on the interior of the building had stopped two days before.

"He knew what he was talking about," said Jenkins. "We couldn't stop them. We had three weeks to do it in, but we just couldn't get together that fast."

Cigarette ash was spilling down the front of his shirt. He scrubbed at it absently, turned, and walked out of the office. The editor watched him go without saying anything . . .

One morning in July, two months after the aliens' landing, a ragged mob armed with Galactic tools appeared near the spaceship. Similar mobs had formed several times during the last ten-night. When a native grew desperate, he lost what little intelligence he had.

The officer in charge, standing in the open doorway, looked them over disdainfully as they approached. There was no need for any defensive measures; they would try to club him with the tools, fail, and go away.

The native in the lead, a big, burly male, raised his tool like a pitchfork. The Galactic watched him with amusement.

The next instant, he was dead, turned into bloody mush on the floor of the airlock.

The mob poured into the ship. Inside, the green-lit hallways were dim and vast as a cathedral. Bored Galactics looked out of doorways. Their bland expressions changed to gapes of horror. Some ran; some hid.

The tools cut them down.

The long corridors echoed to the rattle of running feet, to shouts of excitement and triumph, screams of dismay. The mob swept into every room; it was over in fifteen minutes.

The victors stopped, panting and sweaty, looking around them with the beginnings of wonder. The high-ceilinged rooms were hung with gleaming gold-and-green tapestries ; the desks were carved crystal. Music breathed from somewhere, soothing and quiet.

A tray of food was steaming on a table. A transparent chart had been pulled out of a wall. Under each was a pulpy red smear, a puddle of disorganized tissue.

Baker and Cooley looked up and recognized each other. "Guts," said Baker wryly.

"Technology," said Cooley. "They under-rated us—so did you." He raised the tool he held, careful not to touch the butt. "Ten thousand tries, I hear—and ten thousand dead men. All right, have it your way. I call that guts, too." He lifted his head, staring off into the distance, trying to imagine the hundreds of research stations, hidden in remote areas, with their daily, ghastly toll of human life. "Ten thousand," he said. Baker was shaking with reaction. "We were lucky—it might have been a million . . ." He tried to laugh. "Have to find a new name for this now. No more idiot stick."

Cooley glanced at the floor.

"It depends," he said grimly, "which end of the stick the idiot's on."

Damon Knight

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Not all science fiction stories are serious or scientific although the percentage of humorous and satirical ones is extremely low. Colin Kapp warned us that he intended trying different styles and when this tongue-in-cheek effort arrived we just couldn't resist helping him to take a poke at ourselves.

CALLING MR. FRANCIS

By Colin Kapp

They call this firm 'Miracle Manufacturing and Distributing Company (1928) Limited.' Actually the only part of the name that's strictly true is the 'Limited' bit on the end, which describes the Company's attitude to life. The date, I would surmise, refers to the general age of most of the equipment. We certainly don't manufacture any miracles and I doubt if we distribute many—but what's in a name, anyway?

We did once, though—manufacture a miracle, I mean. Generally we make household electrical gadgets, fires and irons and those dinky electric cleaners which don't sell too well in the shops. As I said, though, we did once make a miracle, and as I was held responsible I figure it's more of my story than anyone else's.

My name is Francis, Mickey Francis. You'd soon get to know me if you worked here because I'm the one they keep

calling for over the loudspeaker. That means something's gone wrong and would I go up to the office and explain what the hell I mean by it all. Leastways, that's how it used to operate.

I was the foreman then, in the big electroplating and finishing shop. Mr. Heppenstall, the production manager, was a highly progressive soul, so we had a pretty comprehensive set-up and kept abreast of all the latest developments in the plating field. We even dispensed with our polishing shop when we got the newest-type bright plating solutions to replace the old dull-plating types.

I don't know if I've told you about these bright solutions before. These are ordinary solutions which give a bright finish by virtue of containing some crafty organic addition-agents, and give a smooth and fully-bright deposit on almost any sort of surface. You just clean your part, fix a wire on it and hang it in the plating tank with the proper current passing. When you take it out it's not only plated with metal but it also looks as though it has been polished. Especially the 'Atem-Brite' nickel.

Don't blame me for the corny name. The plating supply companies always list their products like that. Perhaps it's some sort of modesty. I do all my own chemical analysis to keep the solutions in trim, but I had a natural mistrust of the addition agents, things called Brightener NBG and those little wormlike things called Shine-atem Number Two. I don't go much on this 'drink me' stuff because I like to know what's in my solutions and what I'm reading when I make a titration. But trade secrecy will have its way.

And we had two thousand gallons of Atem-Brite nickel.

Then there was that Monday morning when everything went wrong. Firstly the cadmium tank began to deliver work that was all mottled and streaked with black. Heppy—sorry, Mr. Heppenstall—was slightly abusive about this because it wasted a lot of time and didn't I know any better? I wasn't worried because that can happen in the best regulated of plating shops and Heppy knew it as well as I. Then one of the alkaline cleaners stopped cleaning and caused a lot of rejects, so I wasn't really surprised when George came up and said there was trouble with the Atem-Brite nickel.

When I investigated I soon found that 'trouble' was a gross understatement. This was disaster! Thirty two expensive BXQ radar girling shafts, all government contract work, had

nickel plated very badly indeed. And this, in retrospect, was the beginning of the miracle.

The shafts were covered with a slightly-blued layer of nickel which was so thin that I couldn't detect it at all with a micrometer. Also the surface had a curious extra-metallic sheen about it. It felt soapy and one had the feeling that it ought to be transparent.

"What do you make of it?" asked George.

"I don't know. Sure you haven't got something shorting across the bus-bars?"

We looked, but of course found nothing. George was positive that the parts had been drawing their correct current whilst plating, so there was nothing to do but run another load. I told George to weigh samples before and after plating, and to stay and watch the ammeter. Meanwhile I took the offending parts to the stripping tank to clean off the old deposit.

Anyway, that's what I tried to do. After half an hour I got tired of wasting time and took the parts up to my little analytical laboratory. There are only a finite number of ways of dissolving unwanted nickel and I tried them all—twice. Then George came up with the latest batch from the tank and we put them on the big table and looked miserable at each other.

"Okay!" I said. "Kill that job and bring a couple of samples of the plating solution up here. Then go and lose yourself for an hour while I try to get some sense out of this."

George got lost for an hour and a half. When he did return he was full of that suppressed glee that always charges a subordinate in the face of the impending downfall of his superior.

"Mossy says either he gets the BXQ girling shafts pronto or else he's going straight to Heppenstall."

'Mossy' was the unaffectionate name for the man from M.O.S.I., the Ministry of Supply Inspectorate, who keeps baleful watch over our government-contract plating.

"Mossy can go talk to Lucifer, for all I care," I said. "Pump the Atem-Brite solution into number seven spare tank. Then nip round to the stores and see if they've enough solution concentrate to make up a new batch. If they have get busy and make it up. I want to be able to run it first thing in the morning."

"But two thousand gallons!" said George, trying to baffle an anticipatory smile. "What happens when Heppy finds out?"

"That's my hard luck. Now move ! Book overtime if you must, but don't string it right round to breakfast time. The firm doesn't make that much money."

George moved. Paradoxically, although he takes a perverse delight in seeing me in the dog-house, he would go through fire and alkaline cleaning solution to help me out when I'm really in a jam.

I now had sixty four of the offending shafts. By all the laws of chemistry and physics at least seven of them should have been totally wrecked by my somewhat frenzied efforts to remove the nickel coating. But no such luck. The very considerable chemical violence I had unleashed on them had not even tarnished the beautiful silver-blue surface.

Finally I gathered up a couple of the shafts and went to see Doc Haffner in the metallurgy laboratory. Haffner (everybody calls him Doc) was our metallurgist and one of the best men in the business.

"Mickey," he said affably, "you look worried."

"I am. The wretched Atem-Brite solution is playing up again. Take a look at these."

I handed him two girling shafts. He turned them over carefully, examining the finish, then stripped off the plastic tape which we use to prevent metal depositing on the bearing end.

"It looks like nickel," he said, "but there's precious little of it."

"That's the trouble," said I. "I arranged for a full three-thousandths of an inch deposit on that."

"But you obviously didn't achieve it. Off-hand I'd say it was simply a matter of a bad electrical connection."

"Thanks for nothing," I said. "If it was as simple as that I'd have kicked them straight back for stripping and replating. But it's not that easy. I know for a fact that these parts had their full plating time and current."

"So your solution is out of order?"

"That's true," I said. "but not in the way you think. I had these parts weighed before and after plating. I calculated the increase in weight which they should have received if we deposited the full three-thousandths of an inch of nickel on them. It came to about six grams."

"That sounds reasonable."

"Hell, these parts have been plated and are now six grams heavier than they were before ! The whole weight of the nickel is contained in that slight smear on the surface."

He looked at me speculatively for a moment or two. There were a thousand questions he could have asked, but didn't. He knew I'd already covered all the angles. He positioned one of the shafts under the engineers' microscope and examined it in silence.

"At a rough guess," he said, "I'd say the deposit on here was not more than a few molecules thick."

"Which brings me to the point," said I, "that the nickel on there is many hundreds of times its normal density."

"But that's a physical impossibility." Haffner was cross. "To be true it would mean that the atoms were packed far closer than the normal atomic lattice arrangement would allow."

"Precisely," said I. "It would mean that the atomic structure had collapsed."

Doc Haffner paused and thought over these words carefully for a moment. Then the full implication hit him, and he went a couple of shades paler.

"Collapsed nickel!" he said breathlessly. "But that's impossible!"

"Try it," I invited.

Experimentally he took a triangular file and made as if to cut a groove in the shaft. Instead of biting into soft nickel the file chattered harmlessly across the surface without causing so much as a scratch.

"Look, Mickey," he said, "if this is some sort of a joke . . ."

"Joke! I've got that stuff on sixty-four girling shafts. That's not my idea of a joke. The nickel on there is more than a thousand times its normal density. It's harder than hell and chemically inert as far as I can tell. I don't know how it got to be like that and I can't find any way to get it off again."

At that moment the loudspeaker system hummed into life. "Calling Mr. Francis. Mr. Francis report to the manager's office immediately."

"Look," said Doc quickly, "I think you may have stumbled onto something here. If you're still working for us after you've seen Heppy, come back up here and I'll tell you what I've found."

When I arrived at the office Heppy appeared to be in good form, so there was every prospect of a lively interview. The opening gambit was familiar.

"I think you'll agree," he said, "that I am normally a reasonable man."

I said nothing. This was no time to contradict.

"When I give a man a job I'm never prone to interfere with how he does it—as long as he gets it done. There's just one thing that puzzles me."

"Sir?"

"Exactly who are you working for, Mr. Francis?"

"Well—er—you, of course."

"I'm ve-ry glad to hear it. I must confess I had some doubts on the matter. The tactics you employ on my behalf sometimes seem more suited to the role of saboteur than supervisor."

"I can explain about the nickel, sir."

"And so you shall, Mr. Francis, so you shall. I always enjoy your explanations. They are the one sure thing in a ve-ry uncertain world."

He listened with patient contempt whilst I outlined the difficulties of my position. Whatever else he may be, Heppy is no fool. He didn't believe a word of it.

"Really, Mickey!" he said at last. "You're losing your touch. If you expect me to swallow that gobbledegook you've got another think coming. Now let's take it again from the beginning, and nice and slow this time."

Before I could get to the meat of the problem for the second time the telephone rang. It was NicholSEN, the research director. I didn't catch much of the conversation except a bit about ". . . and get that idiot up here fast!"

"We," said Heppy meaningfully, "are going visiting. I don't know what they've got up in the laboratory but they're acting-up like a group of mad parrakeets—and you're responsible. I don't care if you've discovered uranium in the swill tank, if it interferes with my production schedule you're fired. Okay?"

"Okay," I said, and followed him up to the metallurgy laboratory.

NicholSEN was watching Doc Haffner working on one of the girling shafts. At the end of the shaft, where it had been protected by the plastic tape, Doc had managed to etch several inches of the steel away from inside the quasi-nickel coating. This had left an incredibly-thin cylinder of the nickel without any internal support. He now put this in the metallurgical mounting-press and ran up the pressure, waiting for something

to bend. When the pressure reached twenty tons he desisted, fearing for the bolt-heads on the press.

Nothing bent. The cylinder of nickel, so thin that it was almost beyond measurement, gleamed back polished and malignant, with an unsullied concentricity.

"I don't believe it," said NicholSEN.

"Incredible but true," said Doc. "This is no material which you or I have ever encountered before. It fully bears out Mr. Fancis' hypothesis that this is a collapsed structure."

"You realise," said NicholSEN, "that this represents a major breakthrough in the realm of metal physics."

"If this is true," said Doc sagely, "it represents a major breakthrough in any sort of physics. It's the start of a completely new conception of matter as a whole."

NicholSEN was beside himself with excitement.

"How soon can you complete a thorough investigation of this stuff?"

"We can't here, but I've a friend at Cambridge University who'd give his right arm for a chance to have a go at these samples."

"All right, get them to Cambridge. I want as much data as you can get, and to hell with the cost. With any luck we can scoop the world with a product like that."

Doc needed no second bidding. He snatched up his raincoat and was gone, his coat tails flying out behind him in the haste of his departure.

NicholSEN turned to me. "Now, Mr. Francis," he said almost kindly, "suppose you tell me how you came to make this remarkable discovery."

I began again. I was becoming somewhat practised in the telling of that particular story. NicholSEN heard me out gravely.

"So you have another sixty-two shafts already plated?"

I glanced at Heppy. "Er—yes!" Reluctantly.

"Get them and put them in the big safe. We daren't let this thing out at the moment. Why, if Mammoth Chemicals ever got to . . ."

But I didn't wait to hear him out. I was smitten with a horrible premonition. I dashed downstairs to find my worst fears confirmed. The rest of the girling shafts had gone. George was mildly surprised to see me again.

"The girling shafts—where are they?"

"I gave them to Mossy," he said. "They were a bit under-sized, but he said that in this place anything was better than nothing."

Mossy was even less helpful. "They've gone," he said. "A truck from the Air Research Laboratory picked them up about half an hour ago. You can think yourself lucky I passed them."

"Lucky !" I screamed. "You've ruined me !"

This idea did not seem unwelcome to Mossy and he smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"Look," I said, "I've got to get those shafts back. It's very important."

"No can do. It's secret contract stuff. Nobody would thank me for phoning around asking where they've gone. It's more than my job's worth."

As it was nearing five o'clock I phoned the news for Heppy to break to NicholSEN, and then I went back to the plating shop to see what the mice had been up to whilst I'd been away. Fortunately nothing else had run awry so we closed work for the day without further incident.

The solution which was the root and cause of all this trouble now resided in green bubbly magnificence in number seven spare tank. We don't often use number seven for plating, but the bus-bars are there and a gas heater, of sorts, is located somewhere underneath. I lit up the gas and rounded up about twenty pounds of scrap-iron disks, cleaned and wired them carefully, and hung them in the tank to plate overnight.

Then I too went home, only dimly aware of the technico-logical chaos which I had so thoughtlessly brought about. Life was getting pretty complex.

The following morning, hypocritical in its opening calm, heralded new calamity. The disks which I had plated overnight were obediently covered with the sparse, deceptively thin, collapsed nickel just as the shafts had been. I had them dried and wrapped in tissue paper and put in my office just in case anyone was interested in seeing any samples. Then I forgot the whole affair and continued with the work of the day. I presumed I was still on the payroll because nobody had bothered to tell me any different.

At eleven o'clock somebody came down from the office and wanted to know why the hell I wasn't in the conference room.

It wasn't worth an argument so I went up to find out what went on. I think I startled them a bit going in with plastic apron and gum-boots on because the room was full of boffins and executive types all dressed tidily and complete with brief-cases.

I said 'hullo' and ducked out again. Heppy came to the door and called me a fourth-grade idiot. So I went downstairs and changed into my street clothes, stuffed a couple of old files into my briefcase to pad out the sandwiches, and went back again. I also took a couple of sample disks for good measure.

"Now," said Nicholsen, in a most unfriendly way, "perhaps we can get down to business. I must admit that I find it a little embarrassing to receive a deputation from Harwell so soon after we have made this momentous discovery. As yet we haven't finalised the details of the process, and it's still too early to state what its ultimate potentials are and whether we can extend its scope to other metals and elements.

"However," he looked directly at me, "I can state that at great expense we have succeeded in producing experimental quantities of a collapsed form of nickel. The process appears repeatable and we hope to be offering the service on an experimental basis in the near future!"

I felt a little sick at this, but Heppy nudged me so I sat up and smiled brightly at everyone just to show that I had complete confidence in my superiors.

"I wonder," said a distinguished atom scientist, "if you could show us an example of this peculiar material state?"

This I was prepared for, so I opened my brief-case, took out a sample disk and handed it round. Everyone treated it as though it had been coated with polio virus except for one gentleman who tried to dig into it with a nail file. He achieved nothing and apparently accepted this as proof-positive of our claim to infallibility.

Here the party broke down into several rival factions each trying to postulate a different mathematical formula for a collapsed atomic structure. Scarcely had Nicholsen regained control of the meeting than Nemesis struck with the swift hand of retribution. There was an incredibly sharp crack which deafened everyone momentarily. The heavy glass lampshade overhead shattered and showered glass splinters all down the centre of the conference table, and the plate glass in the book-case cracked and fell outward onto the carpet.

The cause of this phenomenon was a trifle obscure until somebody pointed to the sample disk. Laid on the table, it was just cooling from a cherry-red heat and was greedily burning its way into the green baize.

They manoeuvred it on to an ashtray with a shard of glass and a nail file, and put out the fire with water from a carafe.

"As I said," remarked NicholSEN, with commendable presence of mind, "at the moment the whole technique is purely experimental. What you have just witnessed is probably some form of dynamic reversal from the collapsed state to the more usual spatial lattice arrangement. As you will appreciate the thermodynamics of such a reversion involves a considerable exchange of energy . . ."

Heppy caught my eye. "Get !" he said under his breath and nodded at the door.

I got out rapidly with Heppy at my heels. In the corridor we met George who thought that something had exploded in my office and set some paper on fire. I said I couldn't care less, and Heppy told him to get the whole lot out into the illegitimate yard before the safety officer found out.

"What happened in there ?" asked Heppy unhappily when we reached the stairs.

"Reversion," said I. "The nickel reverted from its collapsed state to its normal state, probably instantaneously. Since it had also to increase in volume the shock wave was not inconsiderable. The velocity of the increase involved a thermodynamic energy exchange which made it hot."

"I see," said Heppy dubiously.

In the office he was all set to get his own back.

"I wonder," he said, wearing his best managerial dignity, "if it wouldn't be good business economics to pay you to stay away."

I said I wasn't averse to the idea if it was put on a contract basis, and anyway I was getting tired of being pushed around. If I wasn't allowed to do my own job in my own way I'd be better off digging ditches or something.

For the first time in five years we were in complete agreement, and this story might have ended right here had not the telephone interrupted. Heppy took the call and turned a pale green. NicholSEN again. Somebody had calculated the energy release from the reversion reaction and had decided that, weight for weight, it appeared to offer a two-thousand percent increase on the best known method of energy storage.

Would we please provide some samples of the exploding-type deposit so that measurements could be made at Harwell.

Some fourteen unexploded disks had been shovelled unceremoniously out into the yard, but as two of these reverted when we tried to pick them up again it was considered worth nobody's time to pack the remainder as samples. I promised to have some more plated by the afternoon, and did just that. It was a relief to relax into the comparatively quiet frenzy of normal routine.

At three o'clock the clutch of boffins and scientists, smelling strongly of drink and after-lunch cigars, came down to the plating shop to see for themselves the fantastic collapsing process in operation. They were slightly put out to see such a tentative and technical operation being carried-out on a two-thousand gallon basis, but accepted it as a measure of our confidence in the process.

The relative crudity of the equipment also put them off a bit until Nichol森 explained that the trick was in certain secret micro-constituents in the solution. He forgot to mention that they were secret even to ourselves. Everyone was agog when I began to withdraw the plated samples from the tank and put them through the hot swill with a needless amount of flourish. I gave them a piece each, then contrived to manoeuvre myself behind the great auto-zinc plating machine to await the inevitable howl that would go up.

The samples had plated all right. Oh yes! Very fine plating indeed. Untrammelled by blister or pitting, the surfaces were a full, clear, bright deposit of rare quality. But collapsed? No! The vandal end of a nail file soon dispelled any doubts about the supposed omnipotence of the deposit. Nichol森's embarrassment would have been a wonderful thing to see had I not been its unwitting cause. I began to wonder if ditch-digging was quite as black as it was painted.

Then the loud-speaker gave me legitimate cause to leave the scene of the crime.

"Calling Mr. Francis! Mr. Francis please take an outside phone call from Cambridge."

It was Doc. He was jubilant. Cambridge had hailed our nickel as the seventeenth wonder of the world. It had collapsed so far as to be the most inert material under the sun, and all sorts of things depended on it. Would I please despatch about three-hundred samples as soon as possible and look out because a contingent from Harwell was coming down.

I told him he was too late, and related the sad incidents of the day. Doc swore and declared he was coming right back to straighten-out the shambles. Well, anyway he came right back.

After the scenes of recriminatory violence had ceased and almost everyone had gone home with headaches, Doc and I went down to the plating shop.

"What do you make of it, Doc?" I asked.

Doc shrugged. "Who can tell what wonders lie just a little out of our sight. Treat the simplest thing with reverence and you will find a miracle in your hands."

"Reverence is an odd companion in a plating shop."

"That isn't true, Mickey. You also have a wonder in your hands if you care to understand it. This nickel solution of yours, what is it? A few handfuls of nickel salts and a muss of water. To you it is a tool of the trade. To me it is something quite different.

"I see it as a fantastic and powerful atomic device in which metals no longer exist even as true atoms, being stripped of essential electrons which are needed to give them actuality. I see an atomic chaos where ions and electricity together unite to form atoms and solid metal. I never cease to be surprised when this miracle takes place. This is atomic physics par excellence. The wonder is not that for a few hours we had a means of producing a collapsed atomic structure but rather that we do not do it more often."

"Heaven forbid!" I said, but I followed his meaning. Looked at in that light, anything was possible. When impurities of the order of only one part per million can have a profound effect on the way these new-born atoms form to give solid metal one is tempted to wonder if miracles are ever very far away.

"You think the collapsed deposits were due to some impurity in the bath?" I asked.

"I'm certain of it. Probably some complex organic breakdown product. Whatever it was, it's not there now. It either co-deposited with the nickel or else got oxidised into something else. The reversions were certainly on those parts plated whilst the contaminant was on the decline. The great pity of it is that it's going to be mighty difficult to reproduce the effect without knowing where to start."

He walked to the tank where the curious nickel had first been produced, and searched around it carefully. Behind it we

discovered half a cheese sandwich and several cigarette ends. It was not impossible that some of the missiles intended for residence down the back of the tank had actually fallen into the solution. Doc sighed.

"If only we had some idea of the decomposition products of chloride of cheese, or the lattice-modifying properties of sulphonated sandwich," he said helplessly. "Then we might have some idea where to start looking."

"Do we have to start looking?"

"We do, my boy. Do you realise the potential of a completely inert and indestructible finish? Everything from the housing of uranium fuel-elements to the nose cones of moon rockets is waiting for just that material. Every industry from chemical manufacture through to electronics could use as much of the stuff as we could produce. With collapsed nickel we might even get to the stars."

"Very fine!" I said. "But we can't make it any more. Whatever caused it has gone and the chances of the impossibility repeating itself in our lifetime is remarkably slight."

"True," said Doc. "That throws us back on empirical research. It'll be a bit tough on you at first, but we'll make it in the end."

"Who's including me?" I said. "From now on I'm specialising in ditches."

"Not so," said Doc. "Only a crazy mixed up plating-technician could have got us into this absurd position in the first place. Therefore it is only logical that we employ that same baffled idiot to get us out of the jam again."

"Says who?"

"Says this," said Doc. He produced a letter promoting me to research assistant at a salary roughly double what even I consider I'm worth. I don't have much resistance in the face of that sort of argument so I said if they really felt like that I'd reconsider about the ditches for a while.

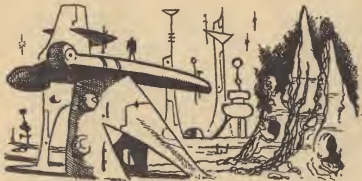
That was nine months ago. So far our research is rather promising, if a little unorthodox. We take so many milligrams of different cheeses and so many unit breadcrumbs to each litre of Atem-Brite solution. Then we dip in a cigarette end and test the solution to see what sort of plating we get. We had a most promising result about two weeks ago using an overripe Caerphilly with some local wholemeal. Unfortunately the

deposit was unstable and burnt one of the lab boys. Still, I suppose that's science for you.

No, it doesn't sound very scientific, but then miracles seldom do. Technically the problem is this. We are looking for an obscure breakdown product of a substitution derivative of a sulphonated poly-lactic hydro-nicotinic acid combined with a complex starch molecule and two hydro-carbon rings branching into a long-tailed amine group. Leastways that's how we figure it at the moment.

That narrows our search down to a random permutation of about fifteen million organic complexes most of which are more theoretical than actual. Just one of these combinations might be the one we need to produce collapsed nickel again. Then again, we could be wrong. That's why we're sticking to the cheese and breadcrumbs approach. Any comments?

Colin Kapp



STRANGE MENHIR

By E. Henley

"No," whispered Rozanne.

The others saw in surprise that she was weeping, the tear-drops floating away like tiny gleaming beads.

This was a magic moment, gazing out of the sky at a new planet, gleaming and silent beneath. Almost unconsciously their lips formed that wonderful word 'down'!

"What is it, Roz?" asked Kathy quietly.

"There's something wrong there. I can feel it." She looked at Teren the pilot. "Oh, don't go down!"

They turned enquiringly to Frank, intent at his search set.

"There's no doubting the echo. It's the *Argus* I all right. I'll get a fix."

Teren frowned. "How's the fuel, Rod?"

The big man, botanist and engineer to the party, grunted.

"Pretty low," he rumbled. "This is pretty nearly a One-G planet. It'd be our last touch-down on what we've got. I must say it looks a bit odd. Too darned black."

As the great ball turned slowly beneath them they could see again the green patch like a minor continent creeping into view. On the few narrow stretches of rock and sand, shadows told of mountains. The rest was a uniform grey-black, unrelieved by the whiteness of snow or the gleaming blue of open water. The blackness itself surrounded the green and engulfed the long rock deserts like a sinister sea.

"It is from the green," whispered Rozanne.

"Imagination," said Anine placidly. "Just a little pre-landing psychosis with a simple post-coma confusion. With

gravity to worry about you'll feel fine." She turned to Frank, listening patiently at the radio. "Any reply from the *Argus I*?"

Frank grimaced and shook his head.

"Echoes. Echoes. Enough for a good fix. Otherwise—nothing."

He recited the co-ordinates and bearings to Teren, who, setting the readings on the finder telescope, gazed down intently.

"Hm. Yes. Can't see it, of course. But there's a group of little rocky outcrops, on the edge of the green there. It looks possible."

His brow wrinkled.

This was always a moment of tension, and the other five watching his face could tell when the die was cast.

They knew now, and when he looked up sharply, were already moving to their places. They were going down.

Rod squeezed Rozanne's hand and touched her cheek, a look of rather dog-like worry on his face.

She returned the pressure.

"Don't worry, Rod. I'm all right."

She closed her eyes and prayed.

Soon would come the awful feeling when her hair pulled and tingled in her scalp, her bowels stirred uneasily as her body took weight, terrible weight, and the pulse inside her hammered and crashed, her sight fading and her lungs screaming for breath. But through the tumult of their approach something seemed to reach out and call to her to give, to yield.

The ship thundered in over the dismal planet, and from the grey-green tangle miles below a tiny mesa reached impossibly up to pluck them from the sky.

"Nice landing, Teren." Frank was enthusiastic. "I'll get a bearing on *Argus I*, right away."

"Much smaller and we would have toppled off it," said Rod wryly.

Teren smiled briefly and shrugged, nodding to the port, at the improbable tangle below.

"Better than trusting to that muck."

So this was it.

Roz raised herself carefully, welcoming gravity like an old but sometimes tiresome friend, and joined the others at the port. Looking down, she knew what it was she feared.

Gaunt and motionless, it towered like a menhir over the alien forest. Nothing moved.

"What's that thing?" whispered Kathy.

"What's anything, till we've given it a name?" Anine's tone was prosaic, yet even she looked a trifle puzzled. She glanced at the men. This—this attraction they did not seem to feel, though they looked through the port with interest.

Frank chuckled.

"Looks like Lot's wife."

"Lot's doing well," murmured Rod, and they laughed.

Further off more of the great things dominated the bush around them. They seemed clustered mainly round a group of isolated rocky hills to the west.

Beyond, oddly disquieting, a featureless band of black girdled the horizon, and the whole land appeared strangely dull under the large mild sun.

For a while they were quiet. This was their last planet-fall, and there was a feeling of awe as they looked out on the world they must learn to know; a world which might, or might not make them welcome.

Frank looked up from his sets.

"Still no answer, chief, but the echo's there all right; a bit confused, but it's somewhere among those hills." He gave a rough bearing.

Teren surveyed the route through the telescope.

"Hm. It'll be among those menhirs over there. It might even be one if it's still upright. They look like rockets." He reflected. "We'll need the eradicator to blast a pathway—"

"No!" The cry was startling, coming from Kathy and Roz at once. Anine frowned, biting her lip. The three men were disturbed by the sudden backlash of female emotion.

"We mustn't destroy unnecessarily," said Anine.

"Not unless absolutely necessary of course," agreed Teren quietly. "We will reconnoitre first. But—" he became brisk, "we must make contact as soon as possible, in case there's need of help. Right! Landing routine. Anine and Roz do final check of atmosphere, and make it good, we don't want a space suit safari. Kathy, food. Rod and—"

Now Rod had gone. He and Teren.

Roz sat at the bottom of the gully as she watched them go. The bush was strange and full of unfamiliar scents, and she was frightened, watching it fold around them, as carefully they picked their way among the great leathery fronds.

In the ship Kathy was helping Frank with the map-mosaic of the planet, while he kept one eye on the signal of the mini-beacon as it crept into the bush. Anine too, seemingly emotionless, had stayed to bring out stores.

"Don't get lost, or Frank'll have three wives," was all she'd said.

Alone at the foot of the mesa, Roxanne found herself wanting Rod with an intensity which frightened her. The great fronds rustled and stirred, and out of the forest the scented air breathed round her, the odours mingling and changing; some seemed oddly familiar, but faded into each other before she could name them.

She looked round startled. It was impossible. The air had filled with the scent of coffee, and the rich aroma of cigar smoke. She closed her eyes and sniffed. Yes, there were fragrant undertones, too, human and feminine. Light years and ages ago, thanks to some space psychologist's wisdom, each woman had brought with her a few precious drops of perfume.

So evocative were the scents that she could almost see the little colony of men and women celebrating their safe planet-fall. Her hand strayed to the pocket of her tunic and took out her own small bottle. She held it to her nose.

The vision vanished, and the fragrance of an English garden broke round her in waves. She gasped. Almost overwhelmed with a sudden sense of urgent appeal she had to fight to control herself and stop it dragging her down into the bush.

Abruptly it left her and she lay shaking on the rock.

She was dazed as she climbed back to the rocket, and Anine and Kathy met her anxiously.

"Roz. Are you all right?"

"What was it, Roz?"

"You mean—you felt it too?"

"Not only felt it Roz," said Kathy, "we heard it."

"Poor Frank was following the mini-beacon signals and got a blast of static that nearly ruptured his eardrums," said Anine. "We wondered if you felt it—even I felt something."

"I was terrified. It knocked me down." Roz put a hand to her brow. "I was quite close to it."

"To what?" Anine's voice was sharp.

"You mean, that menhir thing, Roz?"

Roz nodded.

"I know it's that. Though I don't know how I know." She frowned. "If it calls me again I don't think I can fight it."

"Calls you?" Anine hadn't lost all her scepticism, but Kathy saw that Roz was distressed.

"Come on, switch on the power again, and let's get this cabin erected. We want somewhere to live."

The sun drifted across the misty blue sky, drawing a shimmering haze from the sage-coloured scrub, from which on a gentle wind came the everchanging scents.

Sometimes a stronger gust carried something less pleasant, something foul and dead, a miasma from beyond the green.

Working on the cabin, fitting it and making it ready, the women would pause and glance uneasily at the distant belt of black.

Frank was busy in his own little world of instruments, fixing all points visible from their mesa, pausing to follow the mini-beacon signals, then returning to his charts.

At six on the chronometer the signals started blinking, and he shouted down to the women.

"Anine, Roz! They're okay."

Rod's large frame was feeling the strain of trekking the very first day under gravity.

"Teren, I guess I've had enough."

"Shall we blast a pathway?" Teren too was weary of hours of struggling, ducking, pushing through the tangle, for ever stopping to check their direction.

"No! No, better not. There's no knowing how near we may be."

"Hm. If I see another of those damned menhirs I swear I'll vaporise it. Each one looks just like a ship."

They stopped.

"There's room here to stretch out for the night. Give them the okay on the mini-beacon, and we'll have a meal."

Weary, they were soon asleep on the spongy ground.

"Am I dreaming?" thought Rod.

With a sudden tingle of fright he knew that he wasn't. Only his eyes moved. In the darkness two wide eyes gazed down at him, and below he could just discern the shape of a thin pale body. His fingers edged down towards the gun.

There was a faint cry from the right, and for an instant he glimpsed a second figure. Then both were gone.

"What was it, Rod?" Teren spoke softly.

"Not sure. Looked like ghosts. Guess they were more scared than we were."

"They?"

"Yes. Two I think."

Teren grimaced.

"We were fools. Should have slept in shifts. I wonder how long the night is here." He groaned. "Lord! Gravity! I ache all over."

Rod chuckled ruefully.

"Me too. And there is more of me to ache."

At first light they moved on, more cautiously than before, but saw nothing but the endless green.

Then Teren grunted with disgust.

"Another darned menhir. Let's see what they're made of."

He raised his gun.

"Wait, Teren!"

Through the glasses Rod examined the slender tip. It was too smooth for any menhir.

Silently Teren took the glasses.

"It's it," he breathed. "The *Argus I*."

Suddenly they were clear of the bush, and walking forward, eager but apprehensive onto the low bare rock, where their sister ship stood poised like a needle, shining in the morning sun. But where were the cabins?

"Look, Teren."

They stopped. A great smear of grey-white ash was scattered over more than an acre of the barren outcrop. They knelt to examine it, then got up, and walked silently to the rocket.

The rocket radio was made to last for their centuries of comatose star-drift and *Argus I* and *II* were again in contact.

"But what was it?" Anine spoke for all of them.

Teren's voice answered tersely.

"Metal ash. Fused with the rock surface itself; and a few patches of calcined bone..."

They shuddered.

"But what—?"

"Disintegrator run wild. Only thing it could be."

"But they're foolproof!" Frank sounded indignant.

"They *are* foolproof," shouted Roz, and everyone jumped, "but not proof against—against—"

She was shaking, staring wildly at them, mouthing words. Kathy put an arm round her.

"Is that Roz?" Rod's voice sounded worried over the radio.

"It's all right, my dear," she said shakily. "It's just, there's something here—we don't understand." Her voice rose again. "It released the energy in trying to save itself. It meant them no harm." Her voice trembled. "They were having a celebration dinner, coffee, cigars—"

Her eyes shut and she seemed to crumple.

"Hello, hello." The other voices were faint under the rush of static.

"They were afraid of the little dark things. They came too close and someone was going to kill them." Her voice was a whisper.

Only the indestructible rocket had remained.

Rozanne was conscious of sadness and peace. She was lying on her bed in the cabin, and saw that Kathy was sitting beside her.

"It's all right, Roz dear. How are you feeling?"

"I feel— Oh, I don't know how I feel. At the moment just limp; but something inside me seems part of something bigger; something that's trying to speak to us, that needs our help." She told Kathy about the strange scents, down at the foot of the gully. "Then I was terrified. Now I'm not frightened any more. Poor Rod. Is he very worried?"

"A bit, I think. He's starting back first thing tomorrow."

"Not Teren?"

"No. He's staying with the children."

"Children?" This was something she had missed.

"Yes, poor things. A boy and a girl. They came in naked and half-starved from the bush while the men were in the rocket. They'd surprised them in the night, apparently."

"But how old?" They had started not long after the *Argus I*. But here were children old enough to be living in the bush.

"About ten, they think—unless growth rates differ here." Kathy wrinkled her brow. "Frank said something about relativity and taking a different space-time route—but I'm no mathematician."

"Poor things." Rozanne sighed. "Ten years. Kathy?"

"Yes, Roz?"

"That means there is food."

They were silent.

They could start no colony until they were sure of food. Food meant everything. Their lives, and all they were made for ; to be wives to their men, and mothers to people the new planet ; to pass on their life and their faith before they died.

Anine came in quietly, and broke gently on their silence, as though guessing the reason for it. She squeezed Rozanne's hand.

"Radio Teren's just closed down for the night, but Frank's staying up there in case of anything."

"Anything fresh, Anine?" asked Kathy.

"Yes. They've been going over some of the log—it was in the ship. They had kept it right up to the end."

"Food supplies were ample, Rod reckons. He says the youngsters are well-formed. But now there's virtually none left, we are in a dwindling area of vegetation. It's all one species, apparently, and for some reason it has ceased to propagate itself. It's just slowly dying. He doesn't know what part they've been eating."

When the *Argus I* arrived the world had been a green one, a globe of water wrapped in a vast floating robe of vegetation, which drifted slowly with the feeble tides. There were a few utterly barren continents, whose nature they could only guess ; and this vital archipelago.

Far to the west had lain what their map showed as 'The Black Sea,' a pool of floating death, which endlessly burst into life again as new vegetation battened on the goodness released in the water.

Some entries were hard to understand. '*Many umbrils to the south today.*' '*In the early morning an umbril passed right overhead. Like a rainbow it was. Very beautiful.*' '*The Tall Ones come and go.*' (A reference to the menhirs presumably). And often there were references to the Little Folk, glimpsed in the shifting bush, '*—often close to the Tall Ones.*'

Near the end the Captain had written of the Little Folk appearing round the rock in ever-increasing numbers, and for the first time there was a note of fear.

The final entry was, '*I am having a special dinner tonight and hope that that will help take the women out of themselves. They are becoming very restless.*'

And that was it.

"I wonder what umbrils are," said Kathy.

"Or the Little Folk." Anine spoke quietly. "I'm sure, whatever they are, they and the Umbrils, and the Menhirs are somehow related. Then the *Argus* I came—"

"And the Little Folk mobbed them; someone panicked, and there was an explosion," finished Rozanne.

They pondered this.

"And in some way," said Kathy, "nothing else can go on without the Little Folk." She frowned, gazing down at the darkening forest.

They were silent as they undressed in the half-light, ready for bed. Much later, as the other two shifted restlessly in their sleep, Rozanne got up quietly, and disappeared into the night.

The atmosphere in the rocket cabin was subdued; they had realised that Rozanne had gone. Patiently Frank was tracking the slowly shifting beacon making Rod's approach, while Anine and Kathy cleared away the meal.

"He's not far off now, Anine. You'd better get going if you want to meet him."

She waited at the foot of the gully as the big man detached himself from the forest. She could tell by his tight smile that he realised something had happened, and broke the news as gently as she could.

"I know it's a shock, Rod, but I'm sure that's where she will have gone." She looked at the menhir two or three hundred yards away through the bush. "Frank wouldn't let us follow because—"

"He might lose all three wives."

He tried to grin as she took his pack.

Around them the giant fronds stirred and moved. A curious scent tingled suddenly on the air, which seemed charged with unseen energy.

"Hurry! Hurry!" she cried. "Something is happening."

She fell to the ground as a maelstrom of scents flickered on the electric air, and desperately Rod stumbled back into the bush.

His heart was pounding as he fought his way forward past sagging fleshy stems and great wilting fronds that seemed to shrink and pull themselves back into the ground. At last, panting for breath he stopped, staring with unbelieving eyes.

The whole fantastic forest for a hundred yards around the menhir was suddenly open, reduced to a mat of light green

fibrils, while the menhir itself seemed to expand, straining upwards. An intense hum and an incredibly beautiful perfume vibrated on the air.

Rozanne, radiantly, ecstatically beautiful, stood a few short yards from its base, gazing up at it, with arms and legs stretched wide as though offering her whole being to the thing.

A crimson line like a dart of flame split it from top to bottom.

It was opening !

"Rozanne !" She didn't hear. "Roz—oh, God ! No !"

The whole structure erupted into a mass of billowing red, which boiled down over the girl's figure, moving, shifting, contracting, then slowly subsiding to cover the ground with a carpet of brilliant crimson.

In the middle rose a spire of translucent beauty, a mass of crystal balls frothing from the top. He gave a deep sigh. Rozanne was there, stretching up, reaching for the scintillating mass. Tumbling over her in a slow torrent, it covered her like a foam.

She was crying out, laughing, gathering the stuff in her hands and—he started running, she must be mad—she was eating it.

When he reached her, she was laying exhausted, but opening her eyes put some of the stuff to his lips.

"Rod." She smiled. "Have some. It's good."

Gingerly he tasted it. The warm gentle flavour suffused his being. He knew, they both knew that Man would not be master, but a vital part of something they could scarcely understand, which could live and grow again, and be food and drink for their children. They held close to each other.

In the great depths beneath them, the new seeds stirred, and knowing, struggled toward the light.

Drowsily the man and woman looked up to see the Umbrils glistening as they spread, iridescent in the sunlight, flying outwards to reclaim their planet.

Farther away, wondering, the others saw them go.

E. Henley



One of the finest of our contemporary novelists, Compton Mackenzie, has, among other assets, a distinct flair for comic invention (viz. "Rockets Galore," etc.) In his new book *The Lunatic Republic* (Chatto and Windus, 15/-) he turns his attention to a science-fiction theme, but merely to use the fantastic setting for a satire on current mores. Comparison with Swift is inevitable, reasonable, and rather to the detriment of Mr. Mackenzie. Here we have the Traveller—actually two, a rocket scientist of a future Chinese Republic going off to the Moon with an Englishman, who is the narrator. The preamble, by the way, delightfully tongue-in-cheek, is a joy to read. They land on the Moon and on the far side discover the ultra-civilised state of Lunamania whose inhabitants resemble blue Tweedledums and Tweedledees. The rest of the book is an account of the Earthmen's discoveries of the Lunatic way of life. Mr. Mackenzie now has his mirror for satirizing the foibles of Earth, but the reflections are more often dull than scintillating.

In parodying our wars, parliaments, social idiosyncrasies, nationalities, fashions, sex and sport, against the relentless conformity of the Lunatic community, the author has great fun. Especially with his nomenclature (the Lunatics conveniently use a form of Basic English) such as "talkery" for parliament, "ritemug" for author ("mugs" and "wugs" are the basic genders). Savants are "know-alls," our exploratory moon probes are "fizzers," television is the "see-all" and news sources are "bigmouths." These are altogether delightful, but as the pages go by the account begins to flounder in lengthy and unfunny discussion, and I found it needed rather more than the continually fresh and pleasing wordforms to keep interest from flagging. Still, as one of the Lunatics says to the narrator—"But if your scratch will only be read by duly accredited know-alls, we need not be fussish." As a ritemug in a bookery, I can only echo that sentiment !

Last year's successful *New Worlds'* serial by Eric Frank Russell, *Wasp* (Dobson Books Ltd., 11/6) has wisely been given hard-cover permanence for wider distribution, and needs little recommendation to those of you who enjoyed the slightly different magazine version. I do not ever remember a bad Russell story and such is his expertise that even his poorer efforts are convincingly made to look good. For example this is a run-of-the-mill secret-agent adventure, nothing more, set in an alien locale during an interstellar conflict to bring it within the science-fiction genre. The super-hero goes through the motions of pin-pricking espionage without the character much coming to life, much as a puppet is jerked energetically on its strings. His demoralisation of the fatuous enemy is facile, slightly incredible and awfully lucky. Nevertheless, as a lively puppet show can be enjoyed by a tolerant audience, so it is possible to revel in Russell's smoothly styled action, sardonic eye for humorous details, and, let's face it, his gift for sheer readability.

Also from these pages is *The Outward Urge* by John Wyndham and Lucas Parkes (Michael Joseph, 13/6). More than one press reviewer, I see, has fallen for the "Lucas Parkes" collaboration as being responsible for Wyndham's otherwise unaccountable lapse from his usual style and the inclusion of technicalities. This is nonsense, of course, for here collected under the new title are his four novelettes from last years' *New Worlds* ("For all The Night," "Idiot's Delight," "The Thin Gnat-Voices," and "Space Is a Province of Brazil.") It is the type of straight science-fiction that the author did so well in the old days under his other nom-de-plume, John Beynon ("Stowaway to Mars" et al., going back to the *Amazing's* and *Wonder's* of the early '30's.) and proves that even if we cannot have the usual "Wyndham" masterpiece, then this self-styled "threshold of possibility" space-flight speculation, warmly and humanly characterised and plausibly detailed (Mr. Wyndham is no slouch at 'technicalities') will do very nicely indeed.

The new British writer of considerable talent is Edmund Cooper whose *The Uncertain Midnight* (Hutchinson, 13/6) is a first novel of great promise (it was first published in an American paper-bound edition under the title *Deadly Image*, and subsequently followed by a collection of short stories called *Tomorrow's Gift*, both last year). Using the suspended

animation device, Cooper's protagonist is awakened into the 22nd Century. The short devastating atom war of his own time had depopulated the world, and modest autonomous regional groups have grown up, with science concentrating on the development of humanoid robots into companionable and executive androids. Through the eyes of the Survivor, in the Republic of London, we see the danger to man from his increasing dependence on the androids. There is an underground anti-group and the Survivor successfully leads the struggle to destroy the android menace. Seemingly trite? Yes, but lifted out of the ordinary by the author's elegant prose and flair for the occasional polished phrase which delights enormously, particularly in the opening chapters. The decadent future is clinically portrayed and has its moments of interest, but the story lapses into a hack battle between the androids and the rebels, whilst the emotional situation between hero and female android, always incredible, becomes slightly ludicrous.

As a non-Catholic, I must admit to a lack of appreciation of the finer points of James Blish's new novel *A Case Of Conscience* (Faber and Faber, 15/-). Expanded from a novelette in the American magazine "If" (reprinted in Edmund Crispin's first *Best SF* anthology) the story concerns the reactions of a four-man team of scientific observers on the planet Lithia, inhabited by intelligent lizard-like creatures. The biologist of the party, Father Ruiz-Sanchez, is a Jesuit, and it is his terrifying conclusion as to the real implication of the biological set-up on the paradise planet, that provides the thought-provoking moral problem of the original story. The wonderfully detailed alien culture, the credible human characterisation, and the scientific knowledge, is Blish at his very best. So far, so good. It is in the extension, where back on Earth, the Shelter-State is subverted by a transplanted Lithian, the various sub-plots muddy the story to an extent that the original impact of the Jesuit's troubled conscience is nearly, but not quite, lost. Recommended.

If your feelings toward yet another non-fiction book on space-travel, are likely to be tinged with dismay, still do not be put off by *Sputniks and After* by Karl Gilzin (Macdonald, 21/-). For this is the Soviet account of their recent world-shaking achievements in breaking through the space barrier. It is profusely illustrated showing Russian equipment used (even Laika, the very first space traveller) and ably translated from

the Russian of Mr. Gilzin who seems well qualified for his task in lucidly explaining man's attempts at space travel from the Soviet outlook. Even the usual preamble of fantasy origins and early aero- and astronautic history has that delightful Russian flavour not encountered in our Western accounts. For instance, a 3500 year old legend about a Persian king, Kaikaus, attempting to fly in an eagle-chariot, inspired the great Tajik poet, Firdousi, to write a poem about it. And of course the first man-carrying airplane was built by Alexander Mozhaisky, the founder of modern airplane designing ; while the founder of astronautics is apparently Konstantin Eduardovich Tsiolkovsky. Be that as it may, this factual account of Soviet enterprise in tackling the problems of space exploration is wholly enthralling, and has—which is rather an advantage—a culmination of established fact and accomplishment. Recommended.

Two other non-fiction books from Russia, translated into English and printed in the USSR but published here by Lawrence and Wishart Ltd., of London, are **A Theory of The Origin Of The Earth** by Otto Schmidt (4/6) and **The Sea Bed** by V. Zenkovitch (3/-). Both are extremely interesting little booklets, neatly produced, and well worth the time spent in studying them.

The former contains the late Otto Schmidt's four 1944 lectures on his theory that our Universe was formed from clouds of cosmic dust rather than from the Sun. These have been revised and brought up to date from later material of the author's written between 1951 and 1955. Schmidt, an eminent scientist, is best known in this country for his work on polar exploration.

Professor Zenkovitch's book describes both the old and new methods of analysing the sea bed and gives many interesting reports from various expeditions ranging from the Arctic to the Pacific.

Both books are well recommended to the student—as well as the armchair scientist.

Leslie Flood

An ideal-looking world would not necessarily be the ideal place for a colony to be set up, although it might be very difficult to discover the reason against such a venture. Perhaps the world itself wouldn't want to be colonised or a different type of alien culture take objections to the footprints of Man treading its soil.

SANDS OUR ABODE

By Francis G. Rayer

The distant view, as seen through the binoculars, did not tell much about surface conditions on the planet. Bob slightly adjusted the focus, and again took in their surroundings up to the perimeter of visibility. The rocky table on which they had landed sloped down steeply to dusty brown sands, which rolled away to the horizon. Undulant hills passed slowly across his field of view, smooth and apparently blanketed with grass. Rocky prominences occasionally broke up their flow. There was no sign of habitation, indigenous animal life, or large vegetation.

"An ideal planet to colonise, Captain Spencer," a clipped voice stated.

Bob put down the binoculars. "It could be, sir."

Major Ruffel emitted a sound indicating impatience. Broad-shouldered, a trifle grey at the temples at forty-five, he had a spruce, wiry manner and his gesture as he took in their surroundings suggested his decision was already made.

"I have none of your doubts, Captain!" He indicated the sky, patched with cloud, and the distant hills, bright green under spring sunshine. "Virgin land, probably so fertile that everything we bring from Earth will flourish. No natives to raise difficulties." He inflated his lungs, khaki clad shoulders thrown back. "An unsullied atmosphere, clear as wine! What more would you ask, Captain?"

Bob did not reply. Major Ruffel was probably right, but had an unfortunate habit of assuming and condemning a subordinate's disagreement before it was voiced. Superficially, Antol seemed much like Earth. But the *Argemone*, upright on her stern fifty yards behind them, had crossed ten light years of space. This far from Earth, Bob felt it unwise to make hasty pronouncements.

"The planet may well prove habitable, sir," he said guardedly.

He left Ruffel and returned to the ship. The *Argemone* had touched down at dusk. They had remained inside until dawn. Sandy Trentham, their radio man, had found no local signals on any band, and that alone indicated no civilised race with an advanced science occupied the planet. At the news, Ruffel had been jubilant. Atmosphere tests, made on the spot, and with samples taken while descending, increased his exultation. It was apparent the Major considered this a personal triumph. With dawn, they were ready to leave the ship, and explore.

Sandy Trentham came down the vessel's ladder. His very light blue uniform clashed oddly with his sandy hair and brows, giving him a boyish look.

"The Major been saying good morning?" he asked. "Or getting your clearance on the 'all-satisfied' message to Earth?"

Bob glanced at him quickly. Under Sandy Trentham's apparent lightness was a warning.

"He's been asking you to radio Earth, Sandy?" he asked.

"He has. I've already put through the provisional message on the sub-space radio. We'll get the relayed answer inside twelve hours. It's not within the Major's power to give the final okay alone, though he'd like to do just that."

Bob nodded. Ruffel had an aptitude for taking as much credit as possible. An 'all-satisfied' colonisation message filed under Ruffel's name alone would be a high-power recommendation, back on Earth. Unfortunately for Ruffel, no such message could be sent until other officers on the ship agreed. The first colony ship from Earth could only travel at vast expense, and was not to be risked until everyone with an authoritative opinion had concurred.

"I've not given my clearance," Bob said. "Nor shall I until I'm satisfied!"

"The Major won't like it!"

Bob shrugged, and climbed up into the ship. He could give no actual reason why the 'all-satisfied' message should be delayed. He only knew that he was not yet agreed that Antol was suitable for colonisation.

Hobbs and Griffiths, two crewmen, were preparing to lower the light tracked vehicle used for ground exploration. It had a radius of several hundred miles, if necessary.

Bob went to his own cabin, stooping his lanky six feet form to pass the bulkhead doorway. He briefly reviewed the reports so far collected, and was forced to admit that he could give no reason why colonists should not come. Not even the shadow of a threat could be found in any of the details, already radioed to Earth.

Perhaps Ruffel was right, this time, Bob thought. He descended out of the *Argemone* and found that the caterpillar truck had been lowered, and stood waiting. Hobbs was at the wheel, and Griffiths by his side. Major Ruffel stood in the body of the vehicle, stocky and neat as if from barracks. Sandy Trentham would stay in the ship to watch the radio, Bob guessed. Of the vessel's complement, two others were junior crewmen, engaged on routine checks, and the last Genne Moore, biology officer, incidentally Ruffel's attractive niece, and presumably still enduring self-imposed captivity in her tiny laboratory. Bob was glad she was not coming in the truck—she had an unfortunate knack of backing up the Major even when he was wrong. Her clear blue eyes would spark, her slightly snub nose twitch, and she would produce some pointedly sarcastic observation.

They rode across the hundred yards of rocky table, and began a bumpy descent to the sands at the foot of the slope. Ruffel stood with both hands grasping the truck's side rail, watching everything.

"Looks practically ideal to me, Captain," he said, as they reached the sand. "I suggest we radio confirmation when we get back to the ship."

On one of the side seats, Bob swayed to the truck's motion.

"Isn't that a trifle hasty, sir? We've not really investigated yet—"

"Do we need to?" Ruffel snapped. "Delays cost money. My superiors don't welcome waste. What's more, I dislike delay, especially without reason."

Bob saw it was going to be difficult. The Major was so confident that Antol was an ideal planet, that his decision was already made. Confirmation of suitability would also enhance the Major's reputation as a quick worker, when received within twenty-four hours of landing.

Hobbs, behind the wheel, gave an exclamation and pointed. "See those?"

On one of the green slopes long legged animals, not unlike small goats, were grazing. They were restless, eating in quick snatches, heads raised between mouthfuls. As the vehicle drew near they looked up, then trotted off, disappearing over the hill.

"Probably good eating!" Ruffel said.

Bob morosely gazed the way they had gone. He wondered why he felt uneasy.

"Still looking for hidden snags, Captain?" Ruffel asked acidly.

Bob shook his head. "No, sir. Merely wondering why there's no large vegetation, no trees or bushes, no birds, apparently no insects, and seemingly no variety of species like on Earth."

Ruffel laughed. "You're not wanting to delay confirmation because you can't find a snake in my paradise?"

Griffiths chuckled audibly, and Bob felt uncomfortable. Put like that, delay seemed ridiculous. He let it pass, knowing there could be no reply.

"I suggest we take a sample of the grass back for Miss Moore, sir."

They stopped to collect it. Seen closely, it was quite unlike grass. An inch or so tall, it was extremely wiry, and had short, stiff roots, covered with thick hairs. As he pulled a handful of it, the sandy soil fell away. Apparently the ground held little moisture.

Ruffel was watching him, following his thoughts. "Irrigation will cure that, Captain. Irrigation—and Earth grass to fix the soil if necessary, with the trees for shade."

Bob put the tiny plants in a sample jar from the truck, and snapped on the lid. His unease had abruptly increased tenfold. Not the slightest breeze stirred the plants or touched his face, and he was certain this was the slope up which the restless goats had run.

The creatures had left no footprints in the sand.

Bob thought of that often, as the truck made its round trip a few miles from the ship. It was in his mind as they returned, and uppermost in the hours following. He could not convince himself that he had mistaken the slope for another.

Genne Moore took the sample jar into her room. She paused at the door.

"I have not found any reason why we should delay our 'all-satisfied' message," she said. "I don't imagine I'll find it here." She indicated the jar.

Bob noted her tone. "Aren't we being a little hasty? We've scarcely seen the planet, yet we seem to want to rush off a clearance message—"

Her eyes sparkled. "Delay costs money!"

"So I've heard already." Bob felt extreme irritation, and wished she were not Ruffel's niece. "But it would cost more—much more—if we got a colony ship out here, and found the planet unsuitable."

"Why should it be unsuitable?" Ruffel's snap was in her voice, now. "I've found no parasites, no significant or harmful bacteria. The air would suit a health resort."

"And there are no minor life forms," Bob put in. "No small creatures, no trees."

"I'd noted that." Her voice suggested it was unimportant. "Presumably some oddity in local conditions or evolution which we can soon explain."

"And are we to give the 'all clear' before it *is* explained?"

They stood eye to eye. Additional colour came slowly to the girl's cheeks. Bob saw that she was taking his words as a deliberate slight—an implication that both she herself and Major Ruffel, her uncle, did not know their job.

"You wouldn't be trying to cause delay to detract from what my uncle has achieved?" she demanded icily at last.

Bob's lips snapped together. A retort sprang to his mind, but he suppressed it. He let his eyes say what he thought, turned on a heel, and strode down the narrow corridor. He heard her door close with an angry click.

In the cramped radio room Sandy Trentham sat before his communications equipment. His eyes, keen under his shockingly sandy brows, were sympathetic.

"Been through it again?"

Bob sat down in the spare seat. "It'll be awkward. If the Major didn't pride himself on being a quick worker, he

wouldn't rush things so. As it is, I'm withholding my approval on the 'all clear' without apparent reason. It looks bad." He sighed. Just how bad it could look had been shown by Genne Moore. "There seems to be every reason in the world for giving my approval, and none for withholding it. It worries me."

"You're thinking of some points in particular," Sandy Trentham said, half questioning.

"Only the lack of animal life in general, and vegetation—and the fact that those creatures we saw run up the hill seemed to leave no tracks."

The other started. "You're not serious!"

"I am, Sandy."

"You've mistaken the slope—"

"I'll not deny that would be an explanation."

Sandy Trentham relaxed, again idly twanging the bug key at his hand. "You'll need more than that to convince the Major, or Earth," he said. "Wind could cover their tracks."

"I'm afraid so."

Bob got up. He could see the way everything was leading. He must agree with Ruffel—against his own conviction. Or stand out, without logical reason. In the latter case, the *Argemone* would probably be his last ship: Ruffel's eventual report to his superiors would assure that.

A knock came on the steel door. Sandy Trentham rose, opening it. Genne Moore stood in the corridor. Half as much anger would have made her twice as attractive, Bob thought. Her gaze came directly on him.

"Did you clear the sample jar, Captain Spencer?"

It had been a long time since her tone had been quite so condemning, Bob thought. He shook his head. "I've not touched it, or even seen it since you had it. Why?"

"The plants are gone!" She seemed about to accuse him, but did not. "If it's a joke by one of the crew—or anyone else—it's pretty poor."

"Maybe you think I gave you an empty jar!" Bob growled.

"No. I looked in. I was gone perhaps five minutes. When I got back, the jar was empty."

They stared at each other. There seemed nothing further to say, but a tiny fear had re-awakened in Bob's mind.

"Get Hobbs or one of the others to fetch you a new sample," he said lamely at last.

He spent an hour alone in his cabin ; another hour studying the hills through binoculars. Evening was coming. The scene was peaceful. Near the ship, Hobbs and Griffiths were preparing the truck for a longer expedition. Sandy Trentham eventually came from the radio room with news that Earth was highly pleased with Ruffel's preliminary report, and awaited a complete all-clear as soon as possible. Genne Moore had prepared a brief report on the plants. They were hardy, tough, but lived on a photosynthesis and nutriment basis akin to that on Earth. Guarded questions by Bob did not find the practical joker.

When he descended from the ship he found that Hobbs had stowed provisions and additional fuel in the truck. Bob frowned.

"You're—not staying outside the ship tonight?"

Hobbs drew cords tight. "Yes, sir. Major Ruffel wants us to camp just beyond the hills, to observe those creatures we saw—perhaps catch one."

"But it's a general rule no one stays outside the ship at night until final clearance."

"It *has* been a general rule," a voice said acidly.

Ruffel had come silently round the ship. He stood eyeing Bob as if mentally composing censuring phrases for his report. A thin smile came to his lips.

"I have decided we need not observe the rule about staying in the ship, Captain." His tone had a sting. "In twenty-four hours we have found not a single dangerous animal, nor any other imaginable reason for delaying our investigations." He paused significantly. "You may have the power to hinder my final report to Earth—but I think you will have none to object to my instructions here."

Bob knew he had none. Not out of his unease or doubt could he produce anything to convince Ruffel. He watched the truck slip away into the gathering evening, Hobbs and Griffiths riding jauntily. They had quickly reached the sandy plain which led to the hills, and were soon gone from view.

Bob walked halfway round the ship, and to the edge of the plateau. Here, it was only a few feet down over broken rocks, to reach the sands. He had not remembered they came so near at any point.

Evening made its last long shadows, almost gone. The sky was clear, the sunset like that following a summer day on Earth. He halted at the foot of the brief slope. Ahead were high hills

of sandy soil, tops at least level with the rock table where the *Argemone* rested. The terrain was deceptive, Bob decided. He had not noticed hills that high during the morning's circular trip.

He set off for a near hilltop. The tiny plants were very thick here, carpeting the sand like some wiry, noble moss. Sometimes his boots sank through them, into loose sand underneath. Once he bent, testing the dampness of the powdery soil with a hand. It was almost devoid of moisture, very fine, less gritty than seashore sand, and rather like the multitude particles of a newly built anthill. It should be an excellent basis for cropping and afforestation, as the Major said.

The clear atmosphere made nightfall rapid. From the hilltop Bob could only see other hills, extending to the limit of visibility, and he turned back. All around him there seemed to be a tiny rustling, barely on the threshold of audibility, and the night air moved quietly against his face.

Major Ruffel was waiting for him inside the ship, his expression determined. Bob guessed what was coming—the question of final clearance.

"Have you discovered any other possible dangers, Captain Spencer?" Ruffel asked. "If so, perhaps you will discuss them with us."

Bob did not miss the irony. His grey eyes clouded. Sandy Trentham stood in the corridor to the radio cabin, and nodded slightly.

"Yes," the Major said. "We are all otherwise agreed that the 'all-satisfied' message can be sent. It's up to you, Captain."

Bob dusted his trousers. He had hoped the question would not become quite so direct. Apparently Sandy had agreed: there was no clear reason why not. Genne Moore would have followed the Major's lead. She nearly always did. Therefore responsibility for delaying the clearance now rested solely on his own two shoulders, Bob thought.

"Hobbs and Griffiths are out." He knew he was playing for time. "Wouldn't it be wise to wait till morning. They may have something to report."

Ruffel made an explosive sound, and moved impatiently. "Delay! Delay! Why? What reasons have you?"

A direct question Bob knew he could not avoid. He wished there were more time—to prove his unease was without cause, or to locate its grounds. He gazed out over the dim terrain

below, then back at the watching faces, outlined by the ship's interior lighting.

"We're ten light-years from Earth. Can we judge by appearances, or by Earth standards, out here? Why is this planet apparently so perfect? Why no animals except that nervy lot of ghosts? Why no insects or birds—"

"I've a provisional theory to cover that," Genne Moore said from the background. "Evolution has been rapid, so few secondary forms have branched off. Hence the simplicity of fauna. Traces of extinct, earlier types will doubtless be found. Given specific conditions, an area may easily be almost or exclusively adopted by one type of plant or animal. It happens on Earth. With the remarkable uniformity of conditions here, the area is larger, and the suitability of one life form more exclusive, that's all."

Bob admitted that it could be so. Yet he did not believe it was quite the full explanation. His lips set, his eyes grew stony, and his features became stubborn.

"I'll give my answer in the morning," he said.

The Major reddened visibly. "Earth is waiting our message, and we're ready to send it—"

"I'm not ready to send it," Bob said coldly.

"For what reason?"

"I can't give my reason."

"You mean you haven't one, but want to cause delay!" Ruffel snapped. "When this is known on Earth, I wouldn't give a penny for your chances. As your superior, I demand you agree—"

"That's the one thing in the world you can't order!" Bob moved past them, into the corridor, and stalked to his cabin. Ruffel would never risk sending the clearance signal with one dissident on the ship. In the event of the millionth chance turning up, and something being against colonisation, he would lose his major's crown, or worse.

Ten minutes brought a tap on the door. Sandy Trentham came in, visibly worried. He stood his back to the closed door.

"The Major will break you, Bob." It was a sad statement of fact. "Why not give your clearance? If anything is wrong, we'll all be in it together. But as things stand, you're in for a personal squashing. Bricks fall harder with fewer backs to hit, and when thrown by the Major."

Bob shook his head sadly, and again pillowed his chin on his hands. "I'm not satisfied, Sandy."

"Can you give me one watertight reason why not?"

"None I haven't already mentioned."

"Then I wouldn't be in your shoes from now on."

Shaking his head sadly, Trentham left. Bob nibbled his lips. He wondered if he were risking virtual disgrace for a mere whim. For the twentieth time he reviewed all he knew. The restless goats, grabbing mouthfuls of food, the fertile soil . . . nothing here why Antol should not become a second Earth.

Another knock, more hesitant. He opened the door, was astonished to find Genne Moore, and gave her his chair. She sought for words, avoiding his gaze, then looked him squarely in the face.

"This is private?"

"Of course."

"Then I must tell you rapid clearance means a lot to my uncle." Her gaze was direct, but her voice had an undertone of embarrassment. "He's with two other men on a short list for a most important post—an extremely important post—"

"And a snappy job here could tip the balance?"

She looked at the cabin floor. "Probably."

Bob considered it: a quick, justified 'all-clear' would indeed be a feather in Ruffel's crown.

"If he passed the 'all-clear,' and something turned up, he'd be back in the ranks," he pointed out cautiously. "It works both ways."

"But there is no reason why anything should turn up! I've not found any reason—you've not—"

She gazed at him, half pleading. Bob nibbled his lips. "Before men flew rockets, they lived in trees. Somewhere in my ancestry is a devilishly suspicious fellow. There's women's intuition, too. Why deny it men? Man survived to fly rockets because he was mistrustful of things he didn't understand, when he lived in trees."

He left it at that. There was nothing further to say. She got up, was about to open the door, then surprisingly her fingers closed over his arm.

"My uncle thinks you're making delay, where there need be none, because of a personal grudge or dislike. You know what he can do when he gets back to Earth."

"I know it," Bob admitted with deep regret.

"Then why not give your permission?" Her face had a look Bob had never seen before. "Don't seek trouble—Bob—"

Sad, head slightly bowed, Bob gazed at her. There were eleven reasons out of ten why he should agree—or so it seemed. He dropped his eyes, drew his lips into a thin line.

"I cannot give my permission," he said.

He did not watch her go ; scarcely heard her. When he lifted his head, the cabin was empty.

Bob did not seek the others early. He found Ruffel stamping up and down the narrow corridor, his attention directed on the radio room. Sandy Trentham emerged, nodded, but spoke to the Major.

"No reply from the truck, sir."

"But they were supposed to radio at dawn ! " Ruffel looked jerkily at his watch. "That's over an hour ago ! You contacted them last night ?"

"Yes, sir. Immediately after they had camped, confirming the spot."

"Then why don't they reply now ?"

Sandy Trentham offered no reason, but returned to his radio room. Ruffel went down out of the ship, and stamped to the edge of the rock plateau. Bob half opened the radio cabin door.

"Any reason you can think of why they don't answer, Sandy ?"

"None worth mentioning. The transmitter could have packed up—but I wouldn't bet on it. And they have spares."

Another hour passed, with no reply, and Ruffel studied the far landscape through binoculars, from the highest attainable point on the ship. Descending, he made the only decision which seemed possible : go on foot and find what Hobbs and Griffiths were doing.

Bob soon saw that the march would be no fun. It was difficult to average even three miles an hour, on foot over the loose sandy soil. At that rate it would take nearly seven hours to travel the twenty miles.

Their emergency packs increased in weight with each hour. Major Ruffel took frequent bearings. He had become morose, his face heavy. The straight course was one relatively easy to follow, and the high sun lit the hills brilliantly. When four miles out, the ship was still visible behind. The truck should be seen without trouble, Bob thought.

They rested once, briefly. It was apparent they could not return to the *Argemone* by nightfall, but Genne Moore and the other crewmen should expect to see them by noon.

Hours passed. One green undulant hill replaced another. The sun lowered, and ahead the ground seemed higher.

"Truck should be visible from there," Major Ruffel said.

He wiped his face, and went on. Their course had deviated less than a straight pencil line across a map.

From the top of the highest hill could be seen a vast expanse of other hills, mostly green. The truck could not be found.

"Perhaps we've made less speed than I supposed," Ruffel said.

They went two more miles, and surveyed the terrain from another hill. Bob judged that a circle of at least three miles radius was within the reach of their binoculars, but no vehicle was visible.

"I think we've come a trifle too far," Ruffel said.

No one pointed out that the truck had not been seen. Thirty minutes later the Major halted on a low hill. "This is where it should be," he said, defeated.

They could not see it. Nor did they find it during the daylight hours remaining. Their binoculars picked up no sign of it from any of the surrounding hills, and they abandoned the search when evening had reduced the perimeter of visibility to a few hundred yards. Sandy Trentham voiced the question which had been in Bob's mind.

"Why haven't we seen their tracks? We must have crossed them somewhere." Trentham screwed a foot through the everlasting green carpet, into the loose soil below. "The caterpillars would make a trail we'd see half a mile away."

There was no answer. The light breeze, usual at evening, was too slight to cause drifting, and the verdure secured the top soil against movement, even if winds had swept the locality before they arrived.

They camped halfway up a slope, chewing iron rations, each sunk within himself. Ruffel was the last to speak.

"We'll check this area again, until about noon, then go back to the ship. Hobbs and Griffiths may have returned there by another route."

That was exceedingly unlikely, Bob thought. Their outward trip had been straight as a line. If they had returned, it would be along that line, and Ruffel, Trentham and he himself would have met them early in the day.

Thin clouds came across the sky, obscuring the stars. A whisper as of night wind was all around them, and Bob dozed only fitfully. In some inexplicable way he felt that the green-clad desert hated their intrusion, and wanted them gone, or dead.

As the hours passed, the breath of night wind ceased, replaced by a close airlessness which might precede a storm. Bob stirred occasionally, trying to make his pack a more comfortable pillow. For a long interval, rather after midnight, he lay on his back awake, his gaze often on the stars high above. If Earth's sun were visible, he could not pick it out from other brighter specks scattered across the sky, seen now the cloud had gone.

The feeling of hidden enmity remained, just on the threshold of awareness. He could not pinpoint its cause. It was some primitive instinct keyed into activity by an unknown danger.

It was some hours after midnight when he awoke with a start from uneasy sleep, the feeling of unease vastly intensified. His eyes opened and a warning sensation jerked at his nerves as with physical fingers.

The night was quiet, the stars directly overhead bright and clear. The air felt heavy, confined, yet somehow alive with activity. Straining his ears, Bob decided that there was a continuous sound, so near silence that it could almost have been his imagination. Suddenly an abrupt shock ran through every nerve. He could see stars only at the zenith. All around was a darkness closer than night skies.

He started to his feet, calling Ruffel and Sandy awake. He took a pace forward, stumbled, and found himself on elbows and knees in a sloping wall of crumbly earth. He rolled over, got a hand lamp from his pack, and switched it on.

With Ruffel and Sandy, he occupied the centre of a steep conical depression. All around was a tiny downwards trickle of particles, slowly closing in the walls round them, whispering grain on grain just audible. The sloping sides of the depression were much steeper than forty five degrees, and its upper perimeter could have been thirty feet high.

"Climb !" he said. "For your life !"

Getting out of the pit was so difficult it could have been impossible. Groping hands and toes brought down minor landslides of powdery soil, burying them knee deep. Repeated attempts in one spot undermined the sand above. Minor

avalanches descended on head and shoulders, covering them. Ruffel struggled out of the earth, his lamp gone, and swore. Bob spat out a mouthful of sandy soil.

"Keep moving, or we're finished."

It could have been an hour by the time they reached the top, and even then the escape was only possible because of the masses of sandy earth they had dragged down into the basin, so that it filled and became less steep.

A continuous, faint rustling filled the night, more audible as their laboured breathing subsided. All round the perimeter of the hole the tiny plants stood thick as grass on a pasture. A ceaseless wavy motion passed over the plants, beginning farther away than the light beam could reach, and racing like breakers towards the lip of the crater.

Sandy Trentham's teeth clicked audibly. "Let's get out of here !" he said, and his voice shook.

The plants were so thick, walking over them was like moving ankle deep in moss. Bob bent momentarily, flashing his lamp close on the ground. A thin film of sand was moving rapidly towards the crater, uncannily resembling flowing water. Each of the uncounted millions of tiny plants seemed to sway, brushing along a grain of sand with each minute leaf, simultaneously raising itself, so that it was always on top of the accumulating particles of earth, always moving more grains along towards the hole.

He shivered. It was so tiny an action, yet so devastating in its purpose. All at once he recalled the rocky plateau, and the way in which it had seemed nothing like so far to descend, that morning. And obliterating the goat tracks had taken only minutes.

"I think we should return at once to the ship !" he said, and Major Ruffel did not disagree.

As they marched, at first by hand lamp on a compass bearing, then by a growing dawn light, Bob wondered if it would be too late. He knew, now, why the restless goat-like creatures snatched uneasy mouthfuls. Any living thing that had to stay in one spot, or slept, or could not move its young, was an inevitable victim for the moving sands. Could men fight an enemy as numerous as the grains on all the seashores of Earth itself ?

It was a gruelling forced march. Driven by a sense of danger, they did not rest. The sun rose clear in a cloudless sky, making

bright emerald patches upon the hill slopes. The soil was dusty, loose as freshly turned anthills, slowing their progress. Bob guessed that every hill and slope had been moved again and again, sifted and turned over ceaselessly by the tiny plants. Other species of life had vanished unknown thousands of years before, buried beneath the obliterating particles. That also would have been the destiny of any camp or habitation of Man.

The emerald patches were not static, but seemed to drift with a slow, wavy motion across the hills, moving roughly parallel to their own bearing. Bob saw that his two companions had also noted the tide. Tiny plants were brushed ahead, then in turn gave motion to their companions. The multitude of tiny motions were culminating in a vast flow directed towards the plateau where the *Argemone* rested.

The sun was high when Ruffel paused, checked his watch, compass and pedometer, and made brief mental calculations.

"The ship should almost be in sight ahead," he said, voice rough from fatigue.

A low ridge lay across their line of march, perhaps half a mile away, surmounting higher ground. Bob did not remember having seen it when they set out. As they walked, the tiny plants became even more numerous, so that in places layer on layer formed a bed knee deep.

Panting, they reached the high point of the ridge. Directly ahead, where the *Argemone* had stood, was a vast hill of emerald-covered earth, perhaps eighty feet high, conical and regular. Its top looked flat, and waves like those of an incoming tide ran up its sides.

Bob felt chilled, despite the sun. Ruffel's face had a sallow, aged expression.

"I would scarcely have believed they could do it—" he said hoarsely.

"It's their numbers. Millions. Millions of millions." Sandy Trentham's lips were drawn, his features grimy, sagging with fatigue.

"They've been at it twenty four hours or more," Bob pointed out, remembering how each time it had been less far down from the rocky plateau to the hilly plains. "The movement probably began the minute we landed." Their night camp would have had a similar appearance, on a smaller scale—a regular cone, *with a flat top*. While the cone was uncompleted, there was hope.

The ascent was over a green carpet sometimes ankle deep, sometimes reaching their knees. They slipped often, hands and toes, gripping, masses of the wiry plants coming away under their weight. The slope levelled out, and Bob saw that it was the rim of a crater. In its exact centre stood the *Argemone*, already buried higher than her entrance lock. The plants had not rested at dawn.

"Are we—too late?" Ruffel said, panting, as he came up to the rim.

Bob saw a shovel appear out of the sandy earth, momentarily revealing a hole up through which peered the stained face of one of the crewmen. The man saw them, shouted, beckoning. Then a minor avalanche of powdery soil collapsed on him, again filling the hole. Bob raised himself over the rim, sliding down feet first, Ruffel and Trentham behind him . . .

Coughing, filthy, they got the exit port closed. The corridors just inside were two thirds filled with soil it had been impossible to remove. Bob scrambled along on hands and knees, reached a clear corridor, and ran for the ship's control room.

The *Argemone's* drive awoke slowly, reluctantly. Long before any lift became apparent a vast cloud of dust rose round the ship, towering towards the heavens as if from a bomb exploded under sand. Out of the billowing brown masses the ship lifted, gaining speed.

A minute later they were in clear sky. Below was a vast brown patch formed by the curling clouds of dust, casting a shadow miles long over the hills.

"We never thought you'd make it back in time," Genne Moore said from beside the control room window.

Bob locked the ship on automatic, and looked down on the surface of Antol, a peaceful, dreaming paradise indeed, he thought, but one with a snag it was certainly not yet within Man's power to overcome!

"You've saved me from the greatest blunder of my career," Major Ruffel said in a clipped, tired voice. "I have instructed a message go out at once cancelling my earlier favourable report. When we get back to Earth, I'll not forget what you've done, Captain Spencer."

Bob smiled. "It was only that somewhere in my past was that devilishly suspicious old fellow, Major," he said. He felt a smaller, smoother hand momentarily touch his.

Francis G. Rayer

Author Kenneth Bulmer is building a number of stories round the Terran Survey Corps, each one quite separate and not necessarily containing the same characters. This background identification can be, and is, extremely interesting and each time introduces possible types of alien physiology, philosophy, religion, and many other controversial topics.

THE GENTLE APPROACH

By Kenneth Bulmer

Whenever he contacted a reasonably high-level humanoid culture, Loftus Tait was beset by a bewildering complexity of emotions that stemmed, he supposed, from his own general feelings of insufficiency. And, of course, his own personal problems were gratuitously magnified by the immediate descent, vulture-like, of the culture experts.

T.S.S. *Claymore* had landed on Tanaquil, had made circum-spect contact with the inhabitants, discovered them to be blessed with certain highly-positive and peculiar characteristics and had immediately, in compliance with standing Terran Survey Corps Regulations, called in the alien culture contact experts, thealconul teams.

Thereafter Tait and his crew had stewed in their own juice. They had perforce adopted the role of nursemaids, cooks, waiters and chauffeurs. It hurt.

Tait was sitting in the control room of *Claymore* which to him looked like a mausoleum. "The trouble with experts," he said, "is that there are too many of them."

"Or that, feeling themselves pariahs they tend to hang together for mutual comfort," said Doc Barttlet.

"You mean an expert in one field can find comfort from an expert in another because both know that neither of them knows anything about the other's work?"

"We Jacks of all trades are generally frowned upon by Authority."

"And we do all the work."

"When we are allowed to."

Tait jerked a thumb at the forward screen. "Well, they're not doing a stroke—or, if they are, they might as well not." The view showed on telescopes the open grass-covered space where the Terrans' plastic balloon-tents had been erected facing the jumbled and casually tossed together reed huts of the natives' negotiating delegation.

The sun—very much like old Sol—shone pleasantly at a sufficient distance from the planet to provide a grateful warmth that was not too overpowering should heavy work be necessary. It probably would, Tait surmised with a comical sourness that left no expression on his face. There were white clouds and a blue sky and green fields and trees, a colour combination so startlingly unoriginal as to be a source of perpetual pleasure and comfort to the men of Earth five hundred light years from home.

But the aliens who lived on Tanaquil—and who therefore according to Galactic Law owned the planet—were alien. Although that was to be expected on any extra-terrestrial planet, there were degrees of alienness. Leaving out of the question anything—anyone or any being—not of humanoid shape, still left a large area of diversity. Tait had met these people, recognised at once that he was not competent to deal with them, and had placed the problem of handling them into the hands of alien culture. This department of Terran Survey Corps preened itself, and felt that any other department existed only for their convenience.

This point of view was not shared by the Survey scouts. Tait said heavily to Doc, following his train of thought: "I wish they'd assign us a new location. We're being wasted here."

"Maybe, Loftus. I suppose you fear that a mutiny will appear a trifling diversion, suicide the logical next step and complete and utter round-the-bendedness for all and sundry?"

Tait laughed. "Something like that. The men are occupied fully enough; there's plenty of work. But it isn't the sort of

work we were planned and trained to do. Only the flier pilots are carrying on as normal."

"That bunch of tridi showoffs—"

"Yeah," said Tait dryly. He knew every man of his crew, all one hundred and ten of them. He was a tall, thin, dry professional spacer. Discovering what interesting planets and other celestial objects might be drifting about in space was his job—and then deciding what was best for them in their own interests, with a hefty tip of the scales in the expanding commonwealth of Earth's direction.

He looked up with a smile as Paddy McGilligan put his head in the control room door. McGilligan was the ship's executive officer; very efficient, very cheerful, very addicted to Irish whiskey. The welcoming smile slid off Tait's face. McGilligan wasn't smiling. Such an unusual event foretold the worst.

"What is it, Paddy?"

"That fifth-rate, double-act, Martin and Ferrari. They—"

"Oh," Tait said.

"—thought they could do a better job than thealconcul boys and sneaked off to have a little chat with the natives. I don't know fully what happened." McGilligan looked as though he was breathing fire and slaughter. "They were last seen driving off in one of those three-wheeled carts, singing with the natives, loaded down with flowers and—" McGilligan licked his lips. "And they were waving bottles. Alconcul is raving mad."

"It's damned funny—and damned serious, Paddy. Doc, I suppose food and drink have been cleared okay?"

"Yes, skipper. We can eat, drink and be merry on this planet."

"Faith, man, you needn't finish that!" said McGilligan.

"Well, at least Martin and Ferrari won't die of food poisoning. Metallurgy I can't see being of great help at the moment; but Martin's Biology might help. He knows—"

"He knows a lot, skipper," put in Doc Barttlet, "but he isn't a contact expert. Those two crazy comics may foul up our entire programme here."

"Then maybe we could space out," rumbled McGilligan.

"Talk about a palace revolution," said Tait, rising and stretching. "Here comes Rossiter, thealconcul big boss. I didn't hear your last remark, Paddy, if you want to stay out of the brig— Ah! Rossiter, nice to see you. Always busy. How's it going?"

"It'll be damn well gone, thanks to your crazy crew, Commander Tait!" Rossiter was large, splenetic, fiery faced and an organisation man. He ran his department very efficiently. People who disagreed with him tended to drop out of the promotion stakes. Now he was livid. "I've sent a team to get those madmen back. Lord knows what damage they'll do—or have done."

Tait decided to handle this very cautiously. He said carefully: "I believe my scientific staff are aware of the problems here, Rossiter. I'd be inclined to put this on the basis of a friendly liaison, as between the populace, without bearing on what may be decided by the natives' rulers and by you and your teams."

It partially worked. Rossiter was vulnerable to flattery. He rumbled like an expiring volcano. "That's beside the point. We just can't make any sort of contact with these people. Enigmas, the lot of them. They react in ways that are haphazard to the point of lunacy. I am informing you officially that I will not hold myself responsible for your men's lives, that I shall want them charged if and when they return, and that if we fail here the responsibility will fall squarely on you."

"We all know that first contact with alien humanoids is the job ofalconcul," Tait said, "but in this case I suggest that as you have so signally failed these men are trying—"

"Nonsense! I warn you, Commander Tait, this whole incident is being reported back to *Saumarez*."

Saumarez was the mother ship, orbiting a system four and a half light years off whilst her brood explored a globe of space eight light years in diameter, filled with stars. Rossiter had dropped to Tanaquil in his own scout, T.S.S. *Jenner*, and it was obviously from her that the message was now being sent to *Saumarez*. Tait sweated a bit. This sort of incident could wreck a man's career. Much as he liked Martin and Ferrari, the career he was thinking of was his own.

Unexpectedly, Doc Barttlet said: "The men haven't seen the aliens, you know, Rossiter. Just a few odd glimpses. Don't you think it's bad psychology to coop them up and deny them some interest in what's happening?"

Even Rossiter, brash and top-heavy though he might be, could not brush Doc Barttlet aside; the big, wise and genial old doctor obtained without demand universal respect and attention. Rossiter said, shortly: "You're probably right, doctor; but we have to work to the rules, as you know."

"Rules and opening up the Galaxy don't always go hand in hand."

"With me in command, they do." Rossiter managed a smile. "I'll let you know what happens, Commander. I hope for your sake that those two fools don't wreck everything."

When Rossiter had gone, McGilligan said: "He's a fine one to talk! Him and his team haven't an inkling on what makes these aliens tick."

There was the same old feeling of being part of an ingroup; the Survey scouts, mankind's outriders among the stars, knew that feeling well and resented the intrusion of other organisations. However unjustified such a feeling was, it existed and had to be figured into any equations of human conduct on alien planets. Only Loftus Tait, as the skipper, really felt in any way detached and even he was fully alive to the beguiling pull of wanting to belong.

He said: "It's there outside, Paddy, the job for which thealconcul people have been trained. Not ours. Send Martin and Ferrari to see me when they get back. Think I'll take a stroll outside."

Both the Doc and McGilligan knew enough of their skipper to let him go alone.

It was pleasant to breathe fresh, uncanned air, and to feel a scented breeze on his cheeks. Tait walked unhurriedly from the landing ramp of *Claymore* and set himself to stroll as far as he could inside the perimeter around the ship until Rossiter's guards pulled him up. He was thinking of Martin, the biologist, and Ferrari, the metallurgist. The problem of bringing them back to the ship was Rossiter's, not his. He had a strong desire to rush out there himself. But rules, as Rossiter had said and not, perhaps, as Doc had hinted, were there to be obeyed.

Occasionally Tait treated himself to a smoke. Now he pulled from a pocket in his regulation green coveralls his old pipe with the spring lid and began to fill it with Venusian tobacco from a hermetically sealed plastic pouch. His fingers moved automatically. As he disliked using a gas or petrol lighter he habitually carried a box of wooden matches. Flicking the match alight, he sucked the flame onto the tobacco and saw a slender, delicate, five fingered hand reach out and, gently, take the match away.

He let it go. Surprise held him. Then he swivelled his eyes sideways without moving his head and saw the alien standing gravely in the shrubbery regarding the lighted match.

Tait's breathing slowed down. He stood like that for perhaps five heartbeats, watching the alien, until the match burned down.

He was a man, five foot tall ; two eyes, ears, arms and legs ; one mouth, nose, head and body. These perfectly normal appurtenances were put together differently from a man from Earth's. The difference was subtle but unmistakable. The most pleasing thing from Tait's point of view was that the alien was so far from unprepossessing as to be positively delightful. He reminded Tait, oddly, of a gazelle. The clothing was light, brightly coloured and adequate. An oversize aluminium band adorned one slender arm.

The match sputtered, burned the alien fingers, and was tossed energetically away. The alien's fingers went into his mouth and his face made just the sort of grimaces proper to a child who has burned his fingers.

Tait fought his smile.

A sudden trilling gabble began in the shrubbery. Tait recognised it as the alien tongue ; apart from that it meant nothing. The alien, without taking his eyes from Tait's smoke-puffing pipe, answered. The hidden voice sounded again and a familiarity in its tones caught at Tait's attention. There was impatience and underlying apprehension in it.

Tait decided. He took the pipe from his mouth and said softly : " Winslow ! Come on out of there ! "

There was a startled yelp, followed by a hollow groan. The bushes rustled. Then Winslow, the ship's philologist, scrambled out, patting a scratched cheek.

" Oh, Lor, skipper," he said dolefully. " I told Ahmin here not to—"

Tait took out his box of matches, and cutting off Winslow's anxious babbling, said : " Tell your friend Ahmin he can have these if he likes."

" Don't think it's much good, sir—"

" Well, offer it, Win."

Winslow babbled fluently. The alien suddenly looked disgusted—his expression was describable only in terms of utter repugnance and disgust—spat on the ground, turned, and ran off. His soundless footfalls carried him out of view among trees.

"Well, what do you make of that, Win?"

Winslow was looking extremely uncomfortable. He said : "Unpredictable, skipper. He might have taken the matches and tried to kiss you on both cheeks. Or he might have slipped that little knife they all carry into your tummy. Odd people."

Tait fixed a steely eye on Winslow. He had no intention of doing anything about Winslow's crime ; but he did not intend that the philologist should be unaware that he had committed a crime.

"Well, Winslow, and what explanations have you to offer for talking to an alien in defiance of orders?"

Winslow, who liked to use odd and demotic speech in rebellion against his profession, was a young, feckless scamp and, despite the tragedy on Baskerville, was still lucky enough to possess a psychologically sound mind. He began simply : "After contact the language was easy to crack, sir, and then when thealconcul boys failed to get anywhere I felt it my duty to carry on my own work. I've been going as deeply as I could into the language, and beyond that to culture and mores and the rest, with Ahmin. I have no excuses, sir."

"Once you had cracked the language, Winslow, orders were that no member of my crew should have further contact with the natives. I cannot overlook your crime. I can take my own action on it, however." Tait still refused to unbend. "In future, Winslow, see me if you wish to break orders. You might find it easier."

"Yes, sir."

"Right. Tell no one of this. We shall regard the incident as closed. I shall want to see you and Doc Barttlet later on. Conference. Now cut back to the ship and find out what Martin and Ferrari have been up to."

"Those clowns ? What—I mean, aye, aye, sir."

Winslow cut.

The trouble was, Tait realised fretfully, not so much that there were too many experts as that the experts on the job were too jealous of their own privileges. Young Winslow was a smart lad. In the old days of the Survey Corps, when you just hopped out into the Galaxy, found a plenteous solar system and uncovered what you could of the planets, Winslow would have been a wonder. As it was, today, you turned up

an interesting planet with people on it—real people, like that alien Ahmin—and the culture contact crews moved in and took over. They had it down to a fine art, too.

Any alien visiting Earth for the first time would have been struck by the multifarious divergences in *Homo sapiens* from the original stock. A mixture of stocks, to be precise. Culture patterns on Earth alone covered an amazingly wide field. China and Germany—extremes. Lapland and Samoa—extremes. East and West. The twain might meet—had done so and understood each other and got on famously—but they still retained the potential of their own cultures. So that when men at last fired off into the Galaxy and came across other cultures, the obvious chance was that if an Aryan European couldn't make head or tail of an alien culture, then a Chinese might stand a better chance. And vice versa.

Once any alien civilisation on however crude or advanced a plane had been contacted, the men from Earth of the nearest conceivable culture patterns would be spaced in and set to work. Like could understand like. It was a system that worked. In the past five hundred years something like three hundred alien cultures had been discovered; all on a level technologically beneath that of Earth, and, in the event, some race was known on Earth to speak to these people in terms they could understand.

The aborigines of Australia, suitably attired in their ancestors' absence of clothing, had proved invaluable on more than one occasion. The fact that the 'aboos' possessed Ph.D. degrees and were big wheels in psychology and medicine had little bearing when it came to scampering across a plain with a spear after wild game. Earth used the gentle approach.

The men of the Terran Survey Corps always felt thankful that there had existed minds on Earth wise enough to see the value in preserving the semi-primitive cultures of Earth against just such demands as now were made upon the scouts seeking to make contact with new and alien worlds.

The system worked fine. But it meant that Tait, however much he might joy in discovering a world with humanoid inhabitants, invariably breathed a sigh of relief when the first probe turned up an absence of intelligent life; that meant that he would be able to get on with his job without the interference of pompous asses like Rossiter and the men ofalconul.

Tait had reached the perimeter. He stood quietly in the shade of tall, smooth-barked trees, just to the rear of the barrier, looking across the hundred yards or so of greensward to the balloon-tents and the reed huts. In those constructions men and aliens had been trying to get to know one another—at least, Tait corrected himself—the Terrans had been trying to become acquainted with the natives of Tanaquil. A guard from Rossiter's ship saluted Tait, and then resumed his stand-at-ease stance. His gun was very inconspicuous.

"Anything interesting happening, soldier?" asked Tait.

"No, sir. Not a thing." The guard was young, with golden down on his upper lip and a loose-limbed puppy-like quality in his bearing. "They don't seem to be able to figure these aliens out at all. Puzzles me, sir, why they bother at all."

"I guess we like to be friends with our neighbours, son."

"I don't see that, sir." The young guardsman had the easy respect that sat naturally upon the men who ventured farthest into space. "I mean, we're going to come here and settle the planet, aren't we? We'll move in in the end. Well, why don't we just shake off the land we want. If the natives don't co-operate, well, sir, I guess they can find a reservation somewheres."

"We tried that one back on Earth a long time ago." Tait crinkled up his eyes, thinking. "It didn't work."

"Well, sir, these aliens are the damndest bunch I've ever run across. You just can't figure them. They don't respond to the friends we sent in, guys fromalconcul who're supposed to be just like them."

"The differences aren't important, soldier. The actual culture set-up is secondary to assuring them that we are friendly. In all probability we won't settle colonists here at all; we rarely do on inhabited planets. But we must make contact with them. That's the important thing."

"Well, I guess you're right, sir."

Tait smiled at the soldier's tone. Then he saw the youngster stiffen up in his khaki uniform and snap a salute.

"At ease, soldier." The voice was high and sharp. "Hullo, Tait. Rubbernecking?"

"Hullo, Leaburg," Tait said, keeping the smile on his face. Leaburg was skipper of Rossiter's ship. Tait didn't care for the man one way or the other and the knowledge that Leaburg had two days seniority—two precious unclaimable days—made him act in a more friendly way through sheer reaction at his own realisation of insufficiency. "Just taking the air."

The two commanders moved off, out of earshot of the soldier. Over by the balloon-tents the sound of voice came to them, and they turned, watching. Men and aliens boiled from the tents, scattered in all directions. A puff of orange smoke erupted through a tent; the tent caught fire and the flames spread merrily to the reed huts. Before anything could be done the whole group of temporary structures had burned down. Black smoke rose. Plastics smelled flat and oilily burnt on the air.

"Someone's having fun," Tait observed.

"Those damned aliens!" Leaburg was all steamed up. "Rossiter's an old granny—" He stopped talking abruptly, then went on: "The Survey Corps should be left to handle this with our men on the spot."

"That means me, Leaburg," Tait pointed out gently.

Leaburg gave Tait a sidelong glance. "As senior Corps officer here I could take over from Rossiter. His men have got absolutely nowhere. They've had everyone from a Dyak to an Esquimo in that conference. Even some of the other friendly aliens we've discovered. No good, any of 'em."

"I see you favour the heavy approach, Leaburg. You been talking to those soldiers you've got in your crew?"

"What's that?" Leaburg's expression was ugly.

Tait backed up. "Oh, nothing. I was just wondering what Rossiter will do now. His bag of tricks seems to have failed—"

"He'll carry on. He's made that way." Leaburg would have said more; but made a conscious effort and restrained himself. Tait caught the impression that the man was gleeing privately over something. Leaburg finished: "Hear a couple of your men broke bounds. Makes you look a fool, eh, Tait?"

"I wouldn't say that." Tait was furious. He tried to keep his voice steady. "If you'll excuse me I have some babies to fry for dinner." He turned his back without waiting for an answer.

Damn Leaburg! The man was possessed by something, and having experienced the feeling of pride and power that shook him when he'd first assumed command, Tait suspected what that possession was. He hoped that his next assignment would be a considerable number of insulating parsecs away from Leaburg.

Thinking of the differences between himself and Leaburg recalled to his mind the fragments of conversation with the soldier just before Leaburg had interrupted. Tait had said that

the differences weren't important and, he thought with a sigh, he'd bet that the soldier had misinterpreted that remark. He'd meant that whatever the different cultural set-up of these natives was from anything previously known to Earth or the alien planets in the Terran Commonwealth, the culture itself was not as important as assuring the inhabitants of Tanaquil that Earth was friendly, of getting to know them and putting that single truth across. Even if Earth never fully understood an alien race, making sure that the aliens were friends was the number one problem and demand.

He walked on with his back squarely against Leaburg, trying to prevent himself from breaking into a rapid and body-jolting stride. He forced himself to walk leisurely, as though he was not seething with anger and obsessed with the feeling that because things on this planet were not going right he was the person to blame.

A Pakistani, a Japanese and an African Pygmy were crossing his path diagonally, arguing among themselves. Their colourful dress, exact copies of thousands of years old originals, splashed blots of moving and glowing colour under the trees. They had just left the burning tents. Tait quickened his step till he was walking with them.

"What happened back there?" he asked pleasantly.

They all answered at once, their faces expressing in different ways their feelings of baffled bewilderment and chagrin. The experts ofalconcul were taking a beating.

"Whoa!" laughed Tait, not feeling at all like laughter. "One at a time."

The Pygmy stared up at Tait. "One of them stole a cutting torch. No one knows where or how he laid hands on it. He and his friends expressed their basic egos by gleefully prancing around setting fire to everything."

"That is a debatable point," observed the Pakistani gloomily.

"Do they have a basic ego?"

"Not very strongly expressed," the Japanese said, smiling.

"We believe they practice stealing not quite as an art; but as an acceptable social custom."

"What," asked Tait, guessing, "are their views on accepting gifts?"

The threealconcul experts reacted in three different ways. Their expressions boiled down to one of baffled fury. "One day," the Pygmy said, obviously restraining himself, "they

take everything we offer in sweetness and light. The next they want to slit our throat if we offer a cigarette."

"Religion?" hazarded Tait, feeling a bumpkin in expressing any opinion before these expert and clever men. "Sorts of fasts on feast days?"

Three heads shook as one. "They have a religion," the Japanese said. "But it is nothing like anything we three here have experience in; nor, I fear, has anyone else on the teams any fresh ideas."

The Pakistani took off his turban now that he was clear of the negotiating area and mopped his head. "My people dressed—well—as you were saying: I, too, do not think that religion has any great hold on these aliens."

"That's a bad sign in itself, then," Tait said. "Any race that tries to get along without some religious principles usually winds up by producing very nasty specimens."

"True. But then—" The Japanese shrugged helplessly. "They are such nice little people."

"Who do they most resemble among us?"

"Not me!" said the three experts.

At this Tait really laughed; his bad humour had worn off and he had filed his worry over Martin and Ferrari. The sight of the threealconcul experts all disclaiming kinship with the aliens struck him on the funny bone. "Well, who?"

A fierce argument ensued. Long before it had ended Tait excused himself and walked back to *Claymore*. He had found out that among the experts ofalconcul none knew the answer to the basic requirement. McGilligan had been right. The experts under Rossiter hadn't even got to first base.

The root cause of that might be, Tait had often surmised in any such problematical situation, that the present-day men of Earth were so alike, speaking English as their mother tongue, that they had insensibly debased their old own individual cultures. Perhaps that Japanese back there, for instance, was more modern Terran than he was old Japanese. It was a thought. But if the varied races of Earth and her near alien neighbours of ancient friendship could not between them dredge up some culture with a kinship with that of these aliens of Tanaquil, then the aliens must be alien. They must be alien in a way that had not been met with before in any race of humanoid structure and brain capacity.

And that posed problems.

A being with a brain in a head set erect on a body that walked on two legs, with two arms and hands with opposed thumbs and with two stereoscopic eyes and reasonably good ears should, however widely he diverged from any other similar different being, in the long run have many things in common. Tait began to think and as he did so he quite automatically began to scratch his ear.

When he arrived back at the ship there was still no news of Martin and Ferrari. The aliens had been courteous in allowing Rossiter's team to enter their city—situated two miles off in the fork of a stream, a simple, uncomplicated structure of wooden houses many stories high—but had failed to understand or had pretended not to understand, the sense of urgency in the search for the two scientists of Tait's crew. Rossiter had sent back a brief and explosively pungent report, relayed to *Claymore*, and had then ordered the search teams out. After explaining that the two Terrans were 'not official' and 'not to be taken notice of,' Rossiter, it was evident, considered his work was done.

Tait felt anxiety in his bones. He looked up from the yellow messageslip and met the same anxiety in the unsmiling face of McGilligan.

"Well, Paddy. What do you make of it?"

"I don't like it, skipper, straight I don't. Rossiter hasn't the ghost of an understanding of these people. Perhaps, by telling them all that smoothy-smoothy stuff about our comical twins he's given the aliens the idea that they aren't important." McGilligan pushed his crumpled uniform cap back on his untidy hair. "Faith—if the aliens kill those two you couldn't be blaming them at all. The blame would be on Rossiter." McGilligan went on in an undertone to register his considered opinion of Rossiter.

"Much what I think, Paddy. But it gives me room for manoeuvre. And furiously to think."

"Oh?"

"Where's Doc?"

"Winslow slouched in all steamed up about something and the two of them went into huddle in the cockpit."

"I'd like you to drop in with me. I asked them to a brain-squeezing session."

McGilligan cocked an eye and then, like the good second he was, followed Tait without a further word.

From the half open door of the cockpit floated a noise that—well, Tait sought for some parallel—a noise like a group of drunken and mournful factory whistles breaking into a steaming whine, running up the scale smoothly and then being drowned in the clatter of falling dustbins and maniac children running sticks along iron railings. Tait pushed the door open—ignoring the photo-electric servos—and saw Doc and Winslow hovering over a tape recorder.

“Who’s murdering who?” demanded McGilligan.

The others turned and Winslow shut off the machine. The sounds died in a wailing groan like a fractured steam pipe.

“That, skipper,” said Winslow with evident satisfaction “is genuine Tanaquil music.”

“Music?”

“Sweet and low. Borrowed the tape from a Japanese alconcul boy. He claims his people played music like that when we Western types were wandering around dressed up in tin cans and plucking lutes to ladies in castles.”

“A genuine point of contact?” asked Tait, thinking of the perplexity of the Japanese to whom he had just been speaking.

“No. Their art forms are pure pointillisme. Oh, sure, that’s another point of contact; but not the same one.”

“I often wonder,” Tait said and flavouring the heresy, “just how much we know of Earth’s own historical culture patterns. Rossiter’s sunk. Martin and Ferrari are still in that airy-fairy wooden city. The crew are slowly stewing in their own juice and going sour. And all of this I do not like!” Tait experienced a mild surprise at the responsive start in the others; he must have spoken sharply, he supposed. The three of them—even Doc—had straightened up and were looking intently at him.

He considered a moment, fumbling around the astonishing realisation that he had reached the end of a path and the beginning of a new one; that he was going to make a decision when by all the standing orders of the Terran Survey Corps he had no reason to stir from his own ship. He was again—as once he had before—going to place his own personal conception of what the Survey Corps stood for above mere routine orders. In other words—he was going to stick his neck out.

“Who is duty flier, Paddy?” he asked quietly.

“Pilot Sims, skipper.”

“Send out a call for him, will you?”

“Wilco.”

No one said anything as McGilligan put the call through. It must have been quite clear to them that their captain had come to a decision. They awaited the revelation of his commands each in his different way. A subtle air of excitement began to stir in the cockpit.

What Tait's words to them might have been, had the interruption not occurred just then, he was never perfectly clear himself. He had made up his mind to some course of action. The interruption changed all that. The intercom cheeped, McGilligan answered and the said : " Chute it down," crossed to the dispenser tube and took out the torpedo shaped container and, extracting the yellow messageslip, handed it to Tait. " From *Saumarez*, skipper."

Tait read the signal.

Rossiter's angry report had done its work. *Saumarez* wanted Tait and *Claymore* to put in a personal appearance at base ship to explain. Here the inference was plain enough : they couldn't be trusted in this delicate work. The signal ended ominously that any upheaval of the native population would be held strictly accountable to Commander Tait, any failure of Rossiter's alconcul teams would be largely Tait's responsibility.

Giving the gist of it to the others, Tait finished wryly : " We have our wish, gentlemen. We space off this planet—"

" But you're in a nasty position, skipper," Doc Barttlet said, his whole expression indicative of his anger.

" They can't blame you, skipper !" McGilligan said, his cap thrust up, his face blazing. " This is a grand eventuality, entirely !"

Flier Pilot Sims reported in at that moment and the break of tension gave Tait's crew time to simmer down. He had experienced a piercing thrill of humble joy at the evident concern over his own welfare. If Winslow had not been as demonstrative as the others that was because he, as a junior, could only rally along in order ; whatever happened now, Tait knew that his crew would support him all the way. Anyway, he'd known that before.

Pilot Sims had his leather jerkin with the great fur collar turned up draped around him in his usual dramatic fashion and his salute was as wrist snapping as ever.

" Stand quietly in that corner, Sims, and listen."

" Wilco, skipper."

"Now, gentlemen," began Tait. "The position is quite clear. I shall put forward a procedural recommendation that Rossiter's report and his treatment of Martin and Ferrari have endangered the lives of two of my crew." He glanced around and saw that he had all their attention. "We all grumbled about this planet and the natives and our chores down here. We wanted to space out. Well, now we've been ordered to lift jets for *Saumarez*." He looked at Sims. "Well?"

"Nothing, sir." Sims had reacted to the news and Tait chuckled as he visualised the volatile flier's reactions to the next little bombshell.

"Before we return to base ship I consider it my clear duty to bring my two men back aboard. I fail to read my orders in any other way. To do this I must either send a party or go myself into the aliens' city. I intend to lead the party myself."

The blast of voices all volunteering was loud in the smooth walled cockpit. Tait smiled and held up a hand.

"That, gentlemen, is why you are here."

Someone laughed, it caught on, and even Tait let his tired smile widen. "I don't anticipate trouble. But, Sims, you'd better take along Mitsubishi and his 1-mm machine cannon."

"Aye, aye, sir."

"Winslow. How did Ahmin slip through the perimeter?"

The philologist flushed and shuffled his feet. "Well, sir," he said reluctantly. "I found him out there by chance one day and, as I was able to speak to him, we sort of struck up a friendship."

"I see." Tait sketched in Winslow's adventure with the alien.

Doc Barttlet said: "Sneaked in for a spot of thievery, I expect."

"I've been missing tools, little things like that," McGilligan said. "I'd like a word with this alien pal of yours, Win."

"That's by the by." Tait's mind was slowly feeling its way through the morass of fact and speculation. He thought there was a glimmer of light on the mental horizon; just a glimmer. It was all he had. He said evenly: "I'm trying to do what Rossiter and his experts have failed in doing. They've brought in all the representatives of cultures they can, dressed them up, physically as well as mentally, and sent them in to get on friendly terms with these aliens. They've tried to find the culture nearest to the alien. Well, I propose to work from the

other end. It seems to me that we are as dissimilar as possible to the natives ; we'll go in and act as ourselves, normally, without trying to be like the natives. If like can't get on with like, then like might co-operate with the direct opposite. Any questions ?"

McGilligan glanced at the others' faces. Then he faced Tait and smiled. "No, skip," he said softly. "We're with you, all the way."

"Opposites attract," Doc Barttlet said. "It might work. But—"

"It'll work, me fine doctor, it'll work !" McGilligan said with sudden Irish enthusiasm.

"But, as I was saying," Doc Barttlet went on imperturbably, "we've been ordered to space out for *Saumarez*. Don't you think, skipper, we ought to clear that up ?"

"Thanks, Doc. You're right." Tait crossed to the intercom. "Message to Commander Leaburg, T.S.S. *Jenner*. Intend to space out for *Saumarez* as soon as crew aboard. Got it? Okay. At once."

Doc Barttlet rumbled a coughing chuckle.

"And now," Tait said, crossing briskly to the door. "We'd better get on with it before Leaburg spots the snapper in that message."

They all went out the door, through the shiny and instrument filled intestines of the ship, out to where Sims' flier rested on the grass. Mitsubishi was there, in his gun turret, lovingly polishing his automatics. He saluted smartly, and smiled.

"Keep her low, Sims. Stay in the radar shadow of *Claymore* as long as you can."

"Wilco, skipper."

The flier lifted and, a scant two feet above the ground, skidded away, maintaining a course which kept the bulk of *Claymore* between them and *Jenner*, until the distance grew. At the last possible minute Sims flung the little ship towards the fork in the rivers and the tall wooden city of the natives.

At the first crackle of the radio, which was switched to 'receive,' Tait emitted a light-hearted cackle. The first radio challenge came from *Claymore*. Seconds later *Jenner* chimed in with her radio challenge.

"Good old Sweeney," he said with satisfaction. They ignored both calls and swept on to the alien city.

"Mitsubishi," ordered Tait as soon as they landed on the far bank under the towering wooden walls. "Stay with the flier. Keep contact with us. If the aliens get too curious, lift a few feet in the air. Understood?"

"Aye, aye, sir. Understood."

"Come on, then," Tait said to the others and the little party stepped from the shining silver of the flier into the blackened wood of the alien city. At once they were surrounded.

The aliens pushed and shoved, milling about, trying to press closer to their visitors. Dust arose from the packed streets between the tall window-pierced wooden walls. A continuous murmur rose like bees on a hot summer's day. Tait said: "Got the bottle, Paddy?"

"Sure and here she is, the lovely creature." McGilligan took a whiskey bottle from his hip pocket, uncorked it, tilted it up and drank. A blissful smirk spread across his features.

The others took turns, making exaggerated drinking motions and, under the fierce lash of Tait's whisper, drinking hardly a drop. The effect on the aliens was electrical.

One of their little three-wheeled carts rolled up, drawn by what at first sight appeared to be the second cousin to a llama. Two other carts followed. A sudden rush in the crowd deposited the Terrans in the carts, festooned with flowers, and with many bottles and flasks surrounding their feet. Tait picked up a bottle, waved it over his head, and began to sing.

That was the beginning of a riotous, rib-cracking, joyous, entirely remarkable evening out on the town.

With all the high spirits, the practical jokes, the laughter, it was well-nigh impossible for the Terrans to refuse all hospitality and as the evening wore on and the night set hundreds of stars twinkling friendlily high above the narrow streets, they were flushed and happy, singing and laughing, revelling with new-found friends and for the first time since landing on this planet thoroughly enjoying themselves. Somewhere along that triumphant mardi-gras procession they found Martin and Ferrari. The biologist was wearing only a scarlet loincloth and a mass of flowers. The metallurgist was dressed only in flowers—and his uniform cap.

"I suppose," McGilligan whooped out between great lungfuls of songs about the Mountains of Mourne and Danny Boy and Mother Machree, "you two clowns know you could

be court-martialled and shut up for the rest of your born naturals?"

"Drink up, Paddy!" shouted Martin. "These folk decently enjoy a good drink and a good yarn. Man! The lies old Ferrari's been telling 'em—"

"Not an untruth has crossed my lips!" Ferrari declared virtuously. "We've all been spinning tall stories and if some have the knack—well—"

"How in blazes did you learn the language, then?" asked Winslow, jealous of his preserves.

"We didn't. Couple of the fellows speak English, of a sort. Picked it up in the negotiatin' tents."

The night ripped apart in noise and light and song. The hours blasted away, and Tait found a great contentment on him, which he recognised vaguely must come from the alien drink; not intoxication, but a pleasant heightening of the senses and a feeling that all was well with the world. He fell into close conversation with a native whose command of English markedly improved as he talked with the Earthman. Tait found him simple and approachable, except for brief, highly humorous excursions into playing practical jokes on some other alien or Terran. When Tait lit his pipe and the alien immediately begged a match to set a hot-foot to one of his graver companions, Tait could not stop from shouting with laughter. The assaulted alien turned, smiling, and began to scuffle with them both—alien and Terran alike.

Tait began to catch on.

Winslow was talking until his throat was dry. Doc Barttlet had gone off to look over a hospital. Pilot Sims' dashing fur-lined jacket was the object—along with its owner—of giggling wide-eyed admiration from a bevy of damsels with flowers in their hair. Paddy McGilligan was a wild and happy and outrageously gallant Irishman—and his culture, reflected Tait, was scarcely compatible with that of the natives.'

Only when dawn was peering uncertainly down—blushing—on the revels did Tait have strength of mind to call a halt. He called Mitsubishi on the wrist-radio and the flier came in and picked the Terrans up, one by one, tired, happy and flushed with unforgettable memories.

Doc Barttlet was full of ways of improving the hospital all the way back to *Claymore*.

As soon as they landed and Rossiter and Leaburg were upon them, the storm broke.

Tait made no effort to follow or digest just what the other two were saying. He had that inflated feeling that comes with great tiredness and great happiness. They all walked with Tait in the centre across to *Claymore*. Tait continued on, eyes half-closed, entered the lift and was drawn up to the control room. He felt too emotionally exhausted to use his more athletic method of the ramp this morning. Leaburg and Rossiter, by virtue of their seniority, accompanied him.

Rossiter was fairly foaming, and Leaburg was darkly raging. One or other of them was saying: "And this'll mean the end of you, Tait. The Corps doesn't want men who can't obey orders. You're finished, Tait. Finished!"

Tait stopped. The other stopped with him. He lifted his head and stared at them.

He said: "The natives of Tanaquil are now positively established as friendly. I had a long talk with their leader. They welcome us to their planet. I have explained who we are and what we intend to do, along the lines laid down in the Corps Regulations. Your mission here, gentlemen, is finished." He studied their faces. He could not forbear to add. "Not me."

They stammered incredulous questions, angry demands.

Doc Barttlet came in then, shot Tait a single hard glance, and walked over, pushing Leaburg aside with a quick apology, rolled up Tait's sleeve and shot a quick pick-up dose into his arm. "Bed for you in one hour, skipper!" he said in his voice which meant that captains may be captains but doctors are grown up.

"All right, Doc. Thanks."

"I suggest," Rossiter said. "That you explain exactly what you mean. And also," he added with heavy and wounded irony, "exactly how you managed to accomplish all this when the experts have failed. If you have," he finished darkly savage.

Tait repeated what he had said. "Tanaquil is now friendly. They welcome us. Doctor Barttlet has shown them a little of the help we can give. I talked very earnestly—"

"But how, man, how!" said Leaburg in agitation.

Tait smiled. "Rossiter here had his teams working full-time. They represented the cultures of Earth and her near-alien

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friends. We always tried to come as close as possible to the culture we were contacting. We were all very dedicated, very honest, very sincere about it all. We were too damned serious!"

"You have to be serious in this business," said Rossiter sourly.

"I agree. Up to a point. But here your very gravity destroyed your chances."

"If you're going to say that we didn't know that these aliens had a highly developed sense of humour, then save it. That was one of the first things we discovered."

"I'm pleased for you," Tait said. "You knew then that they liked a practical joke, that they had a sense of humour which although it may be a little coarse for our tastes, was well developed. Their religion—quite strong, by the way—was one of light and warmth without dark spirits and any form of underworld. Their humour was important to them ; but it led on to something else you missed."

"Go on," growled Rossiter.

"When you approached them, to take one example, you wondered why they accepted gifts on occasion and then refused them on another. You had your culture teams out all pretending to be something they were not, trying to ape the ways and mores of their ancestors. An Australian aborigine, who is used to travelling the parsecs between the stars, who has been educated in the latest scientific advances, was asked to take off his clothes and dance about with a boomerang—"

"Not on this planet—"

"But the idea is the same. Youralconcul teams were not *genuine* !"

The others all stared at him.

"And these aliens of Tanaquil had an unerring sense for a phoney. As soon as they spotted a man wasn't sincere, they wanted nothing to do with him. I offered one a box of matches because I thought it was a lever to prise open his reserve. He sensed that at once and wanted nothing to do with my matches—or me." Tait scratched his ear. "As soon as a Terran smelled wrong to them, they shut up shop."

"We figured that they burned down the tents as a twisted form of practical joke," said Rossiter. "But, well, we didn't—"

"You missed out that they could sense whether a man was sincere. We were genuine enough in proffering friendship, which is why they tolerated us, I suppose ; but they were all confused that we kept up this facade of obstruction and

double-dealing which to them smelled sky-high. My two men, Martin and Ferrari, deserve a medal for getting to the bottom of this."

"No, skip," said McGilligan softly. "You do."

Tait punched for engine room and spoke into the intercom.

"Staff? All okay?"

"All green, skipper," responded the cheery voice of Lieutenant Commander Stafford.

"Mister McGilligan," said Tait formally. "We lift jets in fifteen minutes."

"Aye, aye, skipper," said McGilligan, smiling.

"What are you doing, Tait?" demanded Rossiter. "You—"

"I've my orders." Tait watched as McGilligan began to go through the preliminary blast-off drill. "I have to report back to *Saumarez*. I signalled, Leaburg, that I would do so immediately all my crew were aboard."

"Yes, yes," Leaburg said, almost chattering in impotent wrath. "Yes—ah, Rossiter, orders from *Saumarez*."

"And," added Tait, "unless you wish to accompany me I would suggest that you two gentlemen leave my ship at once."

Rossiter bristled; but there was nothing he could do. Then he showed that the Terran Survey Corps did not choose entirely empty-headed or empty-hearted men for its alconcul service. Rossiter held out his hand.

"You've done a good job here, Tait. I—well, my thanks. I'll signal *Saumarez* and fill in the details. We Earthmen need to make friends in the Galaxy. Goodbye."

"Goodbye Rossiter," said Tait, shaking the large red hand. "And good luck with Tanaquil!"

Leaburg said: "If you'll have the goodness to have me piped ashore, Commander, you may blast off and proceed to *Saumarez*."

Tait looked at him, and then gave the necessary order. With the shrill of the pipes in his ears, he watched Leaburg go down in the lift. Then he turned back to McGilligan and Doc Barttlet and Winslow, who were all staring at him. Their expressions made him acutely uncomfortable.

"That's another job out of the way," said Commander Loftus Tait, Terran Survey Corps. "I wonder what the next will be?" He smiled happily. "Well, we go on, we go on."

Old Earth would always go on, out in the Galaxy.

There was always another star.

Kenneth Bulmer



Dear Mr. Carnell,

There is an appreciable tendency of late for some science fiction authors to include a rather pronounced love aspect in their stories, your latest serial "Count-Down" by Charles Eric Maine being a good example.

Personally I find this rather refreshing, provided of course the situations are treated sensibly and are not too overdone. Realising that throughout history women have had a strong influence on man's explorations it is only to be expected that they will continue to do so in the future, either by love or by scientific abilities.

Love, therefore, can be accepted in good s-f and enjoyed by the reader, but *only* if it doesn't spoil a good story by including it unnecessarily. There are many situations where this aspect of life would be out of place in our world of tomorrow, and most s-f stories would be utterly spoilt if too many authors chose to marry off their hero. Editors can therefore show their abilities by safeguarding against an overdose of one particular cliché.

In conclusion then, I would suggest that my fellow readers welcome this kind of variation, but in moderation as I have stressed. Any comments?

R. J. Anderson,
Hayes, Middx.

Dear Mr. Carnell,

Congratulations on your magazine, it's tops. I regret to say that I am not one of the many who have had *New Worlds* since the first issue. This was probably due to the fact that I was then at the ripe age of four.

I divide science fiction writers into three classes: novelists, novelette writers and short story writers. In the first category A. E. van Vogt takes precedence over Isaac Asimov and Eric Frank Russell. For novelettes John Brunner excels, although

James White and E. C. Tubb are consistently good. A. E. van Vogt takes the lead again in the short story field, followed by Eric Frank Russell and Brian W. Aldiss. As you might have gathered from the positioning, I prefer stories with galactic settings to those concerned with interplanetary strife, etc. In your magazine both Lan Wright and Brian W. Aldiss have proved very efficient at writing such stories.

Your covers are always good but my favourite was on number 69, the spaceship against a red background was very effective. The lack of interior illustrations is very pleasing. My mother always glances through my magazines and it weakens my case if there are badly drawn and often crude art forms inside, as American magazines too frequently have.

Postmortem is another page I always turn to with interest. This section is often better than some of the stories. Book reviews, too, are very welcome as the only way of keeping up-to-date with the science fiction world.

To sum up, keep the magazine as it is with the same good quality stories and articles.

John Gleghorn,
Weymouth, Dorset.

Dear Mr. Carnell,

After reading issue No. 80 I had to write to you (a thing which I have been putting off for years). "Earthman's Burden" in my opinion was one of Silverberg's best although it had a rather noticeable similarity to a story (by Robert Silverberg again) published in *Astounding Science Fiction* last April, or thereabouts, entitled "Precedent." Any comment Mr. Silverberg?

Aldiss always writes a good story and "The Towers of San Ampa" was in his best tradition. I enjoyed the article on Mesons and I am afraid I must disagree with Mr. Haller on two counts (a) I think Lan Wright has made an excellent job of "A Man Called Destiny" and (b) I think that the small paragraph at the beginning of each story is a good idea. Sorry Mr. Haller!

I liked the cover by Edwards by the way. I like the idea of putting the contents on the front cover, it saves my having to pick your magazine up off the newsagent's table and leaf through it to find out who had contributed, which needless to say can be rather embarrassing, especially if the financial

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position is adverse and I couldn't afford to buy. I think that is all except to say I have been reading *New Worlds* since 1952 and think that it was then, is now and will be for a long time, the best on the market.

A. Mayer,
St. Annes-on-Sea.

Dear John,

First of all, the cover of *New Worlds* 80 . . . which is pretty abysmal. I have noticed a distinct falling-off in covers since the first few you ran in your "new" style; they have not all been too bad, but this is I think the worst you have run in some time. Looking at it closely, it appears not to be too bad a picture as they go—trouble is, I think, that the colouring's badly chosen and (which may be related) the perspective is bad. But it is not the sort of cover one glance at would compel another, by any means, in fact very much the other way.

A. Mercer, *Lincoln.*

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